**Writing Their Voices**

Documentary Evidence and the Southern Life History Project

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**https://statsmaths.github.io/writing-their-voices**

Introduction

**Overview**

“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 organization of our text into 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) It calls for a move away from focusing on the thought process of 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.[[4]](#footnote-4) 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.[[5]](#footnote-5) Shaped by emerging documentary practices that privileged folkways as well as institutional possibilities created 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.[[6]](#footnote-6) 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.

*Layer 3: Defining Life Histories and Qualified Writers* turns to mapping the topology of the interlocuters that shaped the purpose and possibilities of the SLHP through visual and textual forms of argument. 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, but 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 this process 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 interviewees’ 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* we 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 *Life 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 innovative methods with new affordances of the digital medium.

Layer 1: Motivation for the SLHP

**Introduction**

During the 1920s and 1930s, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill became an epicenter of debates about how to create sociological knowledge by identifying and addressing the problems of the South.[[7]](#footnote-7) As the institution of higher education aspired to become a national research university and an intellectual leader in the region, the opportunity to address the region’s cultural, economic, and social conditions was led by two increasingly prestigious institutional units: University of North Carolina Press (UNC Press) and the Institute for Research in Social Sciences (IRSS). William “Bill” T. Couch, who took the reins of UNC Press in 1925 and became Director in 1932, published work that did not shy away from the South’s problems, demonstrating that reflexive, critical scholarship could come from within the region. Regularly publishing work by acclaimed sociologist Howard Odum and the IRSS, Couch began to question if academic prose driven by statistics adequately communicated the challenges of the region to scholarly and popular audiences as it often failed to accurately represent the actual lives of the people being documented.

The stakes of the debate heightened with the Great Depression, which placed the American South under a microscope. The region’s economic precarity combined with a culture of segregation further cemented the region’s reputation as anti-modern, backward, and impervious to progress; questions about the region’s fitness for full inclusion and citizenship abounded.[[8]](#footnote-8) How to assess and represent the challenges of the region became a central debate.[[9]](#footnote-9) Two warring schools of intellectual thought framed the academic and literary representations of the South.[[10]](#footnote-10) The Agrarians, based at Vanderbilt University, romanticized a return to White, rural, folk culture arguing sociological scholarship was the handmaiden of Northern intellectuals bent on the erosion of Southern traditional values. Howard Odum and his UNC-Chapel Hill colleagues, on the other hand, advocated for systematic, scientific studies of the region through fieldwork conducted by experts so that solutions to social problems could be identified. The evidence constructed a region that was distinct due to its regional culture but also a part of modernity and therefore the nation, earning them a reputation as advocates for “the New South.”

Couch and UNC Press offered another angle on the debate. Attuned to the literary marketplace, Couch understood that readers – who were primarily White, urban, affluent and held significant social and political power in US society - were eager to learn about the region. UNC Press, he argued, should be at the center of releasing cutting edge scholarship about the South, for the press and its authors were best positioned to produce academically rigorous intellectual work. They should be not be “inoffensive” books or hyperbolic literature but ask difficult and challenging questions, he contended.[[11]](#footnote-11) Rather, they should be books that offered a lens into the region, often aided by a sociological bent.

While Couch appreciated scholarship that offered sociological knowledge, especially those concerning the Southern region written for a broader public, he questioned the field’s quantitivate turn in the early 20th Century. He did not believe that faceless, generalized statistics in dense academic prose effectively communicated the conditions in the region. An ardent believer that the South had much to offer the nation, which would only improve if the region addressed their serious issues, he set out on a mission to find more ways to document and understand the region. The New Deal would open up an exciting opportunity to put his ideas into action. This layer explores the larger historical context and academic debates in Chapel Hill that led to Couch’s idea of the Southern Life History Project.

**Welcome to Chapel Hill**

Paving Franklin Street was just one sign of a town on the rise in the 1920s.[[12]](#footnote-12) Chapel Hill was growing as the state’s flagship University expanded and approved over a million dollars in construction projects.[[13]](#footnote-13) Half a million was designated for Graham Memorial Hall, a student union intended to serve as the center of student life. Named after the President of UNC during World War I, the building’s name and prominence signaled the university’s aspirations. Edward Kidder Graham had sought to transform UNC into a research university that, as he stated, “would emphasize the fact that research and classical culture rightly interpreted are as deeply and completely service as any vocational service.”[[14]](#footnote-14) His emphasis on the pursuit of study and research in the liberal arts was shaped by contemporary debates about the goals of the modern university. UNC, he argued, should become a preeminent research university committed to molding students with a concern for the public good.[[15]](#footnote-15) To realize these goals meant building the necessary infrastructure, and UNC had plans to expand southward from Franklin Street rapidly.

While the freshly paved street on which a generation new to car ownership drove Model T’s was a Southern booster’s dream, the main thoroughfare offered daily reminders of the social order.[[16]](#footnote-16) UNC and Chapel Hill leaders’ aspirations were shaped by racialized and gendered understandings of who constituted the public. Segregation defined Southern life and Chapel Hill was no exception. While African Americans had built and maintained a great deal of the campus since its creation in 1789 and were continually employed in domestic and labor-intensive work such as cooking and cleaning, they were denied entry into the classroom. In fact, the state would go as far as to offer scholarships for young Black men to attend institutions like the University of Michigan rather than desegregate.[[17]](#footnote-17) Chapel Hill’s and the state’s flagship university’s aspirations and challenges were indicative of the era.

**The 1920s and the Emergence of the Research University in the South**

The 1920s heralded a cultural shift made possible by post-war economic prosperity, an expanding consumer culture, and increasing progressive social mores.[[18]](#footnote-18) The accouterments of modernity such as cinemas and radios multiplied in urban spaces as millions of Americans moved from the countryside. New South boosters were also eager to advertise the region’s embrace of certain trappings of modernity including participation in commercial markets in rural areas, small towns and cities alike; a process that was well underway during the late 1800s.[[19]](#footnote-19) Trains connected small towns across the South to a national and global economy while the introduction of cars changed Southerners’ relationship to mobility. While eager to advertise certain kinds of modernity, White power brokers were less eager to advertise the Jim Crow laws designed to shore up segregation and maintain white supremacy which became a distinguishing feature that earned the South a reputation for being exceptional.

The calls for modernization were also echoed inside of Southern universities where intellectual elites argued that well respected institutions of higher education were a sign of progress.[[20]](#footnote-20) Efforts throughout the 1920s to raise the profile of UNC as a research university were part and parcel of modernization. Administrators and researchers shared the belief that those who actually resided in the region should have a say about its conditions.

The UNC Press was the first university press established in the South and just three years after its creation, Bill Couch took its reigns. Over his next 20 years at the Press, Couch would transform the publisher into one of the leading university presses in the nation, helping to fulfill the UNC administrators’ goal of establishing the state flagship as one of the top research universities in the South. Couch fulfilled the administration’s goal of scholarly research by dedicating the Press’ focus on the social, economic, and intellectual well-being of the Southeast region. The way the Press used its pages to publish research on the South reveals conflicts over who could publish, what counted as scholarly knowledge, and for whom to publish at UNC and throughout the region during the tumultuous times of the Great Depression and the reign of Jim Crow. In many ways, these conflicts of thought also played out in Couch’s own life.

Couch spent the first seventeen years in rural Virginia where his father earned a living as a local Baptist preacher. Seeking financial stability, the family moved to Chapel Hill in 1917 when his father decided to turn in the collar for the plow. Young Couch worked on the family farm, which floundered, and then was briefly employed by the Southern Power Company before matriculating at UNC Chapel Hill in 1920. However, his tenure was brief, and he joined the Army as World War I waged. He returned to UNC-Chapel Hill two and a half years later and became involved in the student publication *Carolina Magazine*. Couch was still an undergraduate when he caught the attention of University librarian and UNC Press director Louis Round Wilson, thanks to his work as editor of *Carolina Magazine*. Recognizing an opportunity to shape intellectual thought, Couch became Acting Director when Wilson became suddenly ill.[[21]](#footnote-21) No small task for a 24-year-old.

Young, assertive, and constantly walking a fine line between boorish, arrogant, and visionary, Couch brought an intense interest in the region’s working class, shaped by his upbringing on the farm. More broadly he was passionate about the future of the South, which required understanding its contemporary social conditions, an ideal project for a press charged with publishing cutting edge scholarship on the region. This sociological interest paired with a commitment to Southern liberalism placed him directly in conversation and at times contestation with acclaimed scholar Howard W. Odum and his newly formed institute.

Odum was indicative of the research aspirations of the university yet his job title reflected its past: University President Harry W. Chase recruited him in 1920 as the Kenan Professor of Sociology. Odum’s appointment signaled an institution in flux as his research was at odds with William Kenan, the name behind this endowed chair. Born in North Carolina, Kenan was a confederate Civil War veteran and served briefly on UNC’s Board of Trustees. He later became infamous for his participation in the Wilmington Massacre of 1898 in which White leaders in the Southern Democratic Party led a coup d’état against the local government that resulted in the murder of White and Black citizens and harkened in a repressive white supremacist government. [[22]](#footnote-22) Odum’s progressive research combined with an endowed professorship named after this unapologetic white supremacist was emblematic of conflicting impulses within the university.

Born in Georgia, Odum received a B.A. from Emory College in 1904, a M.A. from the University of Mississippi in 1906, a Ph.D. in psychology from Clark in 1909 and a Ph.D. in sociology from Columbia University in 1910. He taught at the University of Georgia and then served as Dean at Emory College from 1919-1920 before arriving at UNC.[[23]](#footnote-23) His research agenda used scientific methods to study folklore and music of the South and was marked by a progressive approach to race relations. His progressive stance was largely informed by the friendships he made while conducting research with African American communities.[[24]](#footnote-24) Odum was in a position of power as an endowed professor in charge of the newly formed Department of Sociology and of the School of Public Welfare, which would become known as the School of Social Work.

**A Center for Sociological Knowledge About the South**

In 1924, Odum opened the Institute for Research in Social Science (IRSS), which would bring together and build the careers of some of the most important scholars of social life of the 20th century including Arthur Raper and Rupert Vance. The creation of IRSS (which eventually would be renamed the Odum Institute in its founder’s honor) signified an important investment in scholarly inquiry about social relations in the South and helped to modernize the new South through intellectual thought that championed liberal ideas in politics and race relations.[[25]](#footnote-25)

IRSS scholars published hundreds of books and articles mostly through their journal *Social Forces* and the UNC Press, both of which Odum helped launch in 1922.*[[26]](#footnote-26)* Odum and Couch recognized that their organizations were not only positioned to be local thought leaders but to shape how the nation understood the region. Moreover, IRSS’s funding was critical to the financial solvency of UNC Press and, consequently, made Odum a powerful voice in the direction of the university press, which often placed him in direct conflict with the fellow White Southerner almost two decades his junior. The stakes of their agreements *and* disagreements heightened as bureaucrats, intellectuals, and the broader public debated the future of the South during a time of economic, cultural, and social turmoil that severe global economic depression exacerbated.

**The Great Depression: A Nation in Turmoil**

The financial crash on October 24, 1929, which became known as Black Tuesday, had been decades in the making. While the economy grew after the depression of the 1890s and World War I, recurring economic panics following the Civil War served as regular reminders of the U.S banking system’s vulnerabilities.[[27]](#footnote-27) Already feeling the impact of global agriculture markets as prices waxed and waned, conditions for agricultural workers only worsened. The nation’s history of settler colonialism resulted in U.S. citizens pushing westward, colonizing native people’s lands, and pursuing agriculture on precarious ground.[[28]](#footnote-28) Millions of acres of land due to over farming and drought left their plows still, and by the 1930s resulted in millions of people migrating in search of subsistence.

Despite the signs, the general sentiment of the Coolidge and the Hoover administrations was that laissez-faire economic policies were working. Government intervention in business and financial markets was curtailed as taxes were reduced and isolationism was the proclaimed strategy for foreign policy, even as the U.S. significantly meddled with and reshaped Latin America. Hoover planned to continue the course until Black Tuesday reminded the nation that its financial institutions remained on precarious ground. Years of unsustainable speculative capital resulted in the crash of the stock market and an economic crisis that quickly moved across the Atlantic. The exigencies of agricultural markets, world war, and capitalism meant too little too late to prevent environmental and economic destruction.[[29]](#footnote-29) By 1932, unemployment surpassed 12 million.[[30]](#footnote-30) The ripple through the economy would leave almost one in four Americans unemployed. Millions of Americans were challenging Hoover’s approach to governance and looking to sign-up for a different path.

Central to national debates about how to end the depression were questions about the role of the federal government and its ability to care for its citizens. By the time Roosevelt came into office in 1933, he was a seasoned veteran of U.S politics and attuned to the changing will of Americans. His election was built on his strong rebuke of 1920s laissez-faire policy and embrace of Progressive Era commitments such as the federal government’s active role in spurring, regulating, and reforming American labor and business. Roosevelt’s administration advocated for extensive federal intervention in the economy and providing social services to alleviate the effects of the depression. Such policies were possible because of a shift in the nation’s willingness to expand federal power if it meant relief and reform. Exactly how government should intervene, which branches of the government had authority for which tasks, and which policies and reforms to implement and for whom occupied national debates. The expansion of federal regulatory power through an activist government that regulated the economy and society became a central tenet of his administration’s signature policies known collectively as the New Deal and its undergirding political philosophy as New Deal liberalism. Intellectuals from academia including Couch and Odum were active participants.

**The Great Depression and the Problem of the South**

In the South, the Great Depression exacerbated an economy mired by exploitative agricultural and industrial capitalists who created poor working conditions, offered low wages, and used the logic of white supremacy to maintain power. Intellectuals, including Couch and Odum, argued over how to assess and understand the impact of global depression on the region and which paths would best alleviate the conditions, a debate informed by a fraught relationship between federal intervention and the region’s White leadership. Federal government leadership and northern intellectuals alike understood the region as lagging behind the rest of the nation. Seen as impervious to change, the South came under a microscope as stereotypes abounded of an anti-modern, depraved, and uneducated region. The South’s economic woes, seen as exceptional and pervasive even by contemporary standards, combined with a culture of segregation enforced through Jim Crow laws and spectacular racial violence, left questions about the region’s fitness for full inclusion and citizenship.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The Great Depression further animated regional debates about the character and future of the South among intellectuals residing in the region’s universities. The entanglement of the New Deal state and literary market with academics meant scholarship from academia impacted government policy and ideas about the region. Couch and Odum sought to position themselves at the center of these regional debates through the scholarship that they produced. While they argued for different approaches to understanding social conditions in the region, both were liberal progressives who were critical but still supportive of modernization. Neither was eager to romanticize Southern “tradition.” Their positioning placed them in debate with a powerful set of intellectuals based at another Southern university on the ascent, Vanderbilt University.

**An Intellectual Divide: Southern Agrarians vs Regionalists**

Questions about how to provide relief to and reform the South spurred a deep rift in academic and literary thought, provoking the intellectual community into two warring schools of thought: Southern Agrarians and Regionalists. Agrarians were best represented through Vanderbilt University academics John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson. Their 1930 manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand,* renounced modernization through industrial capitalism. “The younger southerners, who are being converted frequently to the industrial gospel, must come back to the support of the Southern tradition,” they wrote, adding that “they must be persuaded to look very critically at the advantages of becoming a ‘new South’ which will be only an undistinguished replica of the usual industrial community.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Looking to save “traditional Southern life,” they advocated for a return to agrarian life and the “culture of the soil.” Such calls for a return to traditional values were made without any discussion of the institutionalized systems of slavery that shaped such “tradition.”

Southern Agrarians also felt that Northern progressive thought had infiltrated university halls in the South with their ideas about modernization through industrialization and consumerism. They particularly turned their scrutiny toward the emerging field of Sociology. Agrarians argued that sociological scholarship, much of which was published by UNC Press, aided in the erosion of Southern traditional values. Davidson saw “the sociologist [as] the twentieth-century successor to the nineteenth-century abolitionist. A disturber of the peace and the status quo, he abhorred the concrete, the organic, the religious, and preferred the abstract, the theoretical, and the scientific. Indeed, so blinded by charts, tables and statistics was he that he could not see the flesh and blood individual.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

As the poster child for Sociology and an advocate of “the New South,” Howard Odum and his UNC-Chapel Hill colleagues became the Agrarians’ chief opponents and symbolized the regionalism school of thought.[[34]](#footnote-34) Many of the “Chapel Hill Sociologists,” which they were labeled, may have grown up and worked in the South, but they were not reactionary romantics of the Old South like the Agrarians. While Odum and his colleagues saw great problems in the region, they advocated for systematic, scientific studies of the region so that solutions to social problems could be found, rather than calling for a return to tradition as did the Agrarians.

Though Odum is often referred to as the founder of this sociological approach of regionalism that centered scientific data to address social problems, his work along with his colleagues is directly indebted to W.E.B. Du Bois and the Atlanta School. Du Bois began working at the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory in 1897 at what is now known as Clark Atlanta University. Under Du Bois’ direction, the lab was the first to collect what was understood as objective, scholarly data about Black communities in the South.[[35]](#footnote-35) Their pioneering sociological methods produced data that challenged racist pseudo-science representations of Black communities and suggested improvements.[[36]](#footnote-36) Despite this much earlier and significant advance, Du Bois is rarely credited as the creator of modern American Sociology, regional methods, or the sociology of the South.[[37]](#footnote-37)

While Odum did not center Du Bois’ studies in his own work, he drew on many of his ideas, which guided the development of UNC’s Institute for Research in Social Science. Odum believed that addressing the many problems of the South began with better understanding its unique regional culture. He argued, “cataloguing the traits of the South was the first step toward merging the region with the rest of the nation while maintaining its distinctive culture.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Therefore, his studies were dedicated to this endeavor of cataloguing all types of Southern traits, including folklore, health, technology, and eating habits. His studies painted a dismal picture of an impoverished South in need of economic and cultural reform. To remedy these problems, Odum argued for adapting agricultural ways of life with industrial life to create a “‘new equilibrium between rural and urban’” in order to better integrate into the larger nation.[[39]](#footnote-39) Additionally, he called for improving “race relations through education,” but did not go as far as to call for an end to segregation.[[40]](#footnote-40)

**Shaped by Debate: Couch and the Role of UNC Press**

Amid this debate between Agrarians and Regionalists, Couch came into his intellectual own. While he distressed over the portrayals of the region as backwards and retrograde, Couch did not desire to romanticize or call for a return to “traditional Southern life” like the Southern Agrarians. He believed that romanticizing the region was as unproductive as vilifying the region for neither helped to identify the very real issues that left millions in poverty nor the possibilities for reforms. He worried that such facile and tired stereotypes of the region risked characterizing the South as beyond reform and change. Instead he argued that an emphasis on authenticity and realism would hold a mirror up to the South forcing it to acknowledge the social conditions of the region which included class animosity spurred by industrial capitalism, a social order maintained by racial violence, and economic conditions often producing poverty. Publishing cutting edge work of scholars who were experts in assessing social conditions in order to reshape the debate and characterizations of the region became a raison d’etre for Couch and UNC Press, helping to produce a cultural shift on two fronts. First, the Press showed that Southerners themselves possessed a critical lens about the region eventually publishing over 450 titles under Couch’s tutelage. Second, the Press actively reshaped how the nation understood the region, rather than simply following or responding to others.

**UNC Press and the Ecosystem of Publishing**

UNC Press participated in a larger growing ecosystem of commercial and university presses shaping how intellectuals, policy makers, and the reading public understood the South. The commercial book industry grew substantially in the 1920s and 1930s led by some of the most prominent publishing houses such as Houghton, MacMillan, and Viking and magazines such as the *New York Times*, *Atlantic*, and *Nation*. Centered in New York City, the commercial publishing industry’s primary audience was the White, urban middle and upper class. While sales slowed, book publishing actually maintained a solid footing during the 1930s. One area that caught the attention of publishers, critics, and readers attention was the South. The publishers noted consumers’ – mostly bourgeois urban White consumers residing in urban communities – interest in the exotic and ‘Other;’ places and people outside of their social and cultural milieu. In many ways, it was such an interest that helped spur the Southern Literary Renaissance.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Importantly, the commercial book industry did not shy away from work that addressed issues in the South, much to the chagrin of the Agrarians who saw Southern presses as complicit in the erosion of Southern values. Agrarian champion, Donald Davidson, included publishing in the “great Northern offensive of the 1920s,” which began during the Harding Administration and aimed to attack “Southern life and its characteristic institutions.” He argued that:

This attack was more abusive and unrelenting than anything the Southern states have experienced since the last Federal soldier was withdrawn from their soil. In the nineteen-twenties there was no single institution, like slavery, upon which attacks could be centered. They had a vaguer objective in the so-called backwardness, or ‘cultural lag,’ of the South. The Northern press, with all of the Southern press that takes its cue from New York…unanimously agreed that the South [was] guilty of number crimes against progress…’ ultimately creating ‘an image of the benighted South, a savage South of racial hatred and religious fanaticism.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Entering the literary marketplace were books by authors such as Howard Odum who identified and addressed the South’s problems, novelists such as Erskine Caldwell and Grace Lumpkin, as well as magazine articles on the very topics these books discussed such as mill workers’ labor struggles and the conditions of tenant farming.[[43]](#footnote-43) As a result, the commercial press became a site where reformist messages that called for changes to oppressive conditions in the South such as racial violence, poverty, and the industrial-capitalist order took precedence over agrarian romanticism. These publishers were the precise Northern presses that the Agrarians railed against as they saw the presses as demonizing the South and its culture.

**Publishing Scholarship About the South**

While commercial publishers were publishing more books about the region, they were still few and far between compared to the scholarly output of Southern academics, which UNC Press harnessed. By the 1930s, academic publishing through a university press was in vogue. While there had been fits and starts in the United States, the early 1900s saw the ascendency of university presses with the rise of the research university. Institutions like Johns Hopkins University argued that knowledge should not be limited to those who could participate in the daily life of the university but rather should be more accessible to broader publics.[[44]](#footnote-44) One mechanism of dissemination was publishing. However, commercial publishers knew the audience for scholarly works was marginal, particularly when it came to potential profits. University presses, on the other hand, were non-profits and had major institutions, some of which would become the most affluent non-profits in the world by the 21st century, behind them.

When Couch took the reins of UNC Press, he was unamused with the university press landscape. Looking to court rather than shy away from contentious and controversial topics and ideas, Couch viewed other university presses as safe and cautious. “There is much in them which should be a warning and an example to us,” he stated, adding that “if the University Press, like Harvard or Yale, is to devote itself to bringing out nice inoffensive books—perfect examples of modern scholarship—it seems to me that the legislative gentlemen who protest at our expenditures have a real reason for their protests.”[[45]](#footnote-45) If anything, Couch believed the press should be more critical in order to further rigorous intellectual thought about the region.[[46]](#footnote-46) Publishing could be a form of intellectual activism, and playing it safe was a conservative stance that silenced rather than fostered intellectual inquiry.[[47]](#footnote-47) Such a philosophy helped to turn UNC Press into an intellectual leader known for publishing accessible, innovative, and often contentious scholarship, but put Couch regularly at odds with his board of directors and university leadership including Howard Odum.[[48]](#footnote-48)

While Howard Odum and Couch’s personal relationship soured over time, Couch valued the cutting-edge research on the social and economic problems of the South coming from Institute for Research in Social Science. UNC Press became their publishing house printing 31 books from the institute between 1924-1934.[[49]](#footnote-49) Acclaimed scholars such as Arthur Raper and Rupert Vance produced studies on areas such as race relations, labor relations, government, and Southern history.[[50]](#footnote-50) Arthur Raper’s *The Tragedy of Lynching* (1933), for example, used case studies to illustrate the prevalence of lynching, describe how White Southerners justified this form of vigilante violence, and explain the cultural and economic impact of lynching on the region.[[51]](#footnote-51) Reviewing the book in the *Journal of Negro History*, Rayford W. Logan offered praise for the book calling it “one of the most notable contributions to the literature about America’s greatest shame” and noted that such a book came from a Southern press. He wrote, “Of more than passing interest is the fact that a book so condemnatory of the South should be published by the University of North Carolina Press, although this is by no means the first time that this publishing house has brought out books that do not portray that section as the domicile of chivalry.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Works like Raper’s garnered acclaim and ire for both the Institute and UNC Press.

Like Odum, Couch shared a concern for the region’s significant challenges. In fact, Odum alongside university leadership including President Harry W. Chase and prominent faculty such as Edwin Greenlaw founded UNC Press with visions that the press would be the center of intellectual life in the region by addressing pressing concerns. However, the rift between Odum and Couch began to grow as time passed. Complicated by the Press’s initial financial dependency on the IRSS, Odum and Couch increasingly disagreed over audiences and about what kinds of knowledge could reveal the challenges of the region. It didn’t help that Couch was disinterested in the quantitative turn underway in Sociology, spurred by the field’s interest in securing a position as a science. Couch believed in communicating to a broader audience than academics, which necessitated a strategy other than dense specialized prose or faceless statistics.[[53]](#footnote-53) After all, one reason he was earning a national reputation for publishing some of the most influential scholarship on the region was because of his belief that books should be accessible to a range of audiences. [[54]](#footnote-54)

**An Opportunity**

Couch noticed an opportunity to intervene in the larger literary market by publishing works that could appeal to a broader reading public that had stoked the Southern Literary Renaissance. Readers and Southern writers were no longer wading in the violent and stale waters of Southern exceptionalism and Lost Cause romanticism. They were looking for fresh, realist, and critical perspectives on Southern culture and society. Yet, Couch had developed reservations about the work produced as a part of the Southern Literary Renaissance for he was concerned that its focus on fiction did not fully capture the conditions of the South or the lived realities of its people. UNC Press, he reasoned, was positioned to reach the same audience with books that were grounded in rigorous scholarly inquiry written in an inviting nonfiction prose.

With national reputations and success in their respective areas, the rift between Couch and Odum grew even deeper. While Couch was persuaded by Sociology’s focus on social systems that led to societal problems, his skepticism of the very way sociology produced knowledge mounted. He understood the reliance on statistics rather than thick description as obfuscating the lived realities of people. However, he saw more promise in sociology’s method known as case history, which analyzed a single person’s life in detail, but that method, too, had its problems. Case history usually focused on people identified as deviant, and left little room for the subject’s own assessment of their life. Moreover, regardless of the method, Couch believed that scholarship in sociology purposefully produced prose that was less accessible to a more general public, which represented a ignificant shortcome in motivating the public to address identified social problems. Couch troubled over how to effectively convey the social conditions of the region in order to convey the complexities of life in the South when a new door opened.

Roosevelt’s administration was engaging in an incredible expansion of federal power in order to bring about relief, reform, and recovery from the Great Depression. Cultural workers, including intellectuals and writers, would become part this “The New Deal” through a new agency called the Federal Writers Project, where Couch quickly rose through the ranks. The rise of the New Deal and the Federal Writers’ Project shaped Couch’s efforts to remake sociological knowledge about the South by giving him an opportunity to produce a new method of documenting and writing that centered the perspective of the people themselves.

Layer 2: Formation of the SLHP

Debates emanating from Chapel Hill over how to understand, document, and represent the South took on new urgency as the effects of the Great Depression continued to ripple throughout the nation and the world. In most cases, the challenges were not new. Issues such as exploitative agricultural economies, industrialization, and unemployment were exacerbated, but not new features of American society. The need to understand and alleviate these social issues took on new urgency with the Great Depression, a problem the Roosevelt Administration hoped to solve through the New Deal.

Against this backdrop emerged the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP). Part employment project and part laudatory experiment in federal support of cultural work, this New Deal agency pursued documentary projects and entered the fore over how to document and communicate the “real” conditions of people in the U.S.[[55]](#footnote-55) Who should be documented, how they should be documented, and why they should be documented were key questions that animated Couch when he joined the Southeastern region of the FWP in 1936.[[56]](#footnote-56) 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 Odum and other sociologists over how to best capture the real nature of Southern life.[[57]](#footnote-57)

To accomplish this documentary project, Couch sent unemployed white-collar workers, hired as federal writers, across the Southeast region to interview fellow Southerners about their lives and thereby shape their own identity while communicating local and regional challenges. The ability to hear from Southerners in their words, Couch argued, lent authority and authenticity to their claims about their conditions. Since garnering university support was a tall task, in part due to Odum’s skepticism about the project, Couch utilized his position in the FWP to launch the life histories project. By engaging in questions about how best to capture, document, and analyze social conditions, Couch, UNC, and the New Deal would shape what counted as sociological knowledge and the role of public institutions in the process.[[58]](#footnote-58)

**The New Deal**

As Couch and Odum debated how to assess and address the needs of the South, government officials in Washington were rapidly passing new legislation to alleviate the effects of the Great Depression. With the support of his prominent advisors, known colloquially as the “Brain Trust,” Roosevelt paired his Executive Order power along with the legislative power of Congress to implement a series of policies that were, he stated, “a new deal for the American people.”[[59]](#footnote-59) They reasoned that full recovery required support services that aided those struggling and laws that reformed the very systems that led to economic turmoil. What followed was a series of programs and regulations designed to offer relief while offering reforms that would lead to recovery.

The First New Deal (1933-1934) focused on providing immediate relief through banking and monetary reform. Along with reforms such as moving the United States dollar off the gold standard, the government began to regulate securities at the federal level and require disclosures that helped assess the health of the banks such as gains and losses. Relief was significantly directed at agriculture and providing aid to farmers. The Farm Security Administration paid farmers to put away their plows in order to raise agriculture prices while infrastructure projects like the Rural Electrification Administration and Tennessee Valley Authority were designed to modernize rural life and create jobs. Developing further relief programs, the Second New Deal (1935-1936) focused on American workers - creating jobs, providing social security, and improving labor relations. The federal government served as the nation’s largest employer, hiring in sectors as disparate as highway construction and theatre performance. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), founded in May 1935, led the way by employing millions of mostly White Americans to labor on public works. As such, the federal government demonstrated the strength of the nation as it led the recovery.

While the WPA is often most remembered for its public works such as roads and dams, White collar workers were also in need of work, especially writers, artists, and other cultural workers who began advocating for relief, including the creation of unions.[[60]](#footnote-60) For example, the Author’s League, established in 1917, joined forces with the Unemployed Writers’ Association (UWA), a new organization founded in January 1934 in response to the depression, to lobby Congress to develop a national plan to employ writers. Frustrated by what they saw as partial gains, a subset of members of the UWA became the Writers’ Union.[[61]](#footnote-61) Other writers picketed in the streets to be included in the WPA.[[62]](#footnote-62) To what degree such unions had a direct impact on government policies remains an open question, but there is no denying that organizing helped bring attention to the plight of cultural workers.[[63]](#footnote-63)

At the same time, there were bureaucrats who valued cultural workers’ labor; some argued that all types of workers deserved access to federal resources while others recognized the cultural power of harnessing cultural work. Franklin Roosevelt, for example, supported such efforts because artists needed to live too.[[64]](#footnote-64) Others argued that writers were in a position to highlight and therefore celebrate American life during a crisis of confidence in the nation.[[65]](#footnote-65) Whether driven by providing equal opportunity for employment or using art to celebrate national pride, bureaucrats came together to support employing cultural workers.

**The Founding of the WPA**

Among these savvy and empathetic bureaucrats who recognized cultural workers as deserving support was one of Roosevelt’s trusted New Deal leaders, Harry Hopkins, who served as head of the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) from 1933 to 1935. His philosophy toward economic relief was to match the skills of those on relief with work opportunities that fit their skill sets, so he ordered surveys to assess the occupations of relief recipients. Among the ranks were white collar workers, including writers and artists, who were left out of the state-run relief programs that equated work with manual labor.[[66]](#footnote-66) An artist laying piling for a building was as much a mismatch as a construction worker painting a mural in a city hall. Rather, he reasoned, employment opportunities should reflect the occupations of those on relief. He scoured his network to find successful models for national-level cultural worker programs.

Conditions changed in August 1934 when Hopkin’s former college classmate, Hugh Harlan, became supervisor of the Newspapers Writers’ Project for Los Angeles County. Professional writers were hired to write histories, conduct sociological studies, and write reports. Over half of the writers left for full-time employment, which was considered a resounding success. FERA leaders Jake Baker and Arthur “Tex” Goldschmidt used the program’s success as well as ideas from advocacy groups, such as the Writers’ Union, to outline potential national programs within FERA that included commissioning projects for public institutions, hiring Black writers, interviewing ex-slaves in Ohio, and documenting America’s folklore, which was understood to be vanishing.[[67]](#footnote-67)

When Baker asked Henry Alsberg to join FERA in mid-1934 as supervisor of reports and records, he, too, liked the idea of a writer’s project.[[68]](#footnote-68) Alsberg had matriculated through elite schools in New York City including Columbia, which he entered at 15 years old and stayed for law school. Alsberg was among many Columbia graduates who entered the ranks of New Deal leadership, but his path wasn’t a clear one into government service. After deciding that neither law nor academia was for him, he became a foreign correspondent and then returned stateside to New York City. A writer and supporter of theatre, he circulated in leftist circles and counted among his friends Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and Issac Don Levine. While accounts of Alsberg’s manner suggest his personality was more bohemian than bureaucratic, he enjoyed great respect from colleagues who had ascended into powerful roles within the New Deal state.[[69]](#footnote-69) Once he joined FERA, he was in a position to shape policy and direct resources, which he did by directing his attention to how the government could support cultural workers, particularly writers. He would soon count Couch among his colleagues and confidants and lent his support to collecting life histories and the Southern Life Histories Project.

**The WPA Sets-Up Federal #1**

In 1935, FERA was replaced with two new federal agencies — the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Social Security Administration. Hopkins was tapped to lead the WPA in 1935 and brought with him his care for cultural workers; such a commitment was important because the WPA was appropriated over 4.8 billion dollars ($90 billion in 2019): 6.7 percent of the nation’s GDP.[[70]](#footnote-70) WPA focused on employment, which marked a shift in New Deal policy from funding relief rolls to providing steady jobs with wages established by the government. Like FERA, the focus was on public works, particularly infrastructure such as buildings and roads. However, with Hopkins at the helm, the WPA quickly sought to add programs for white collar workers and procured hundreds of millions of dollars earmarked for these efforts. One reason the monies were sent to the WPA over other agencies, such as Public Works Administration, was due to the creation of Federal Project Number One (Federal #1).

Under the Works Progress Administration, Federal #1 employed over 40,000 creatives in areas such as art, music, acting, and writing under five projects: Federal Art Project, Federal Music Project, Federal Theatre Project, Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), and the Historical Records Survey. The Historical Records Survey began as a part of the FWP but became a separate project in 1939 as the FWP came under increased scrutiny. While a small percentage of WPA employees, only 40,000 of the 8.5 million who worked for the WPA, the cultural impact of Federal #1 was anything but insignificant.[[71]](#footnote-71) Scholars agree that the effort was among the largest and most influential government-led and administered efforts to support and shape cultural production in the United States.[[72]](#footnote-72) Thanks to the support of Alsberg, the life histories project would flourish under the FWP and provide needed autonomy from UNC and Odum.

**Creating the Documentary Decade**

While the structural conditions of the New Deal enabled Couch to find a home for the Southern Life History Project within Federal #1, these formations were also shaped by particular cultural conditions. Labeled by scholars as the “documentary decade,” the 1930s was a period in which cultural workers experimented with documentary representation.[[73]](#footnote-73) Documentary came in many forms including aurally over the radio as well as in writing and images in books, newspapers, exhibitions, and films. Documentary enjoyed claims that it accurately represented reality that gave it political and cultural salience. Listeners could tune into radio documentaries to hear from people in their own words while readers could turn the pages of a documentary book for thick descriptions that conveyed actuality.[[74]](#footnote-74) The indexicality of photography and film lent images a claim to the real that gave documentary authority and power.[[75]](#footnote-75) Documentary - as a genre, form, and idea - was understood as a powerful way of representing reality during the period.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Documentary’s assent was in large part due to the exigencies of the era. Questions abounded about how to understand and communicate the effects of the Great Depression. Cultural workers in areas such as mass media and the federal government looked for methods to make visible and authentically represent contemporary conditions. The need to communicate the toll of the depression led to documentary expression in forms such as film, photography, performance, and writing.

Recognizing a literary market, the publishing industry enjoyed the success of documentary books like *You Have Seen Their Faces*by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White.[[77]](#footnote-77) However, it was not only the belief in documentary’s ability to assess and render visible the effects of the Great Depression that elevated its status, but also its privileged position for rendering truthful depictions of actuality that could “authentically” document everyday life.

**The Power of Social Documentary**

“Social documentary,” in particular, caught the imagination of Americans, making it a prominent genre and cultural form that enjoyed legitimacy and authority. While exact definitions of social documentary remain an open debate, the concept in the 1930s meant work that focused on documenting social conditions.[[78]](#footnote-78) This idea was shaped by over forty years of social documentary photography best known through the work of people like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, known for images of New York City tenements and of child labor in factories respectively. Moreover, cultural workers believed that emphasizing the everyday hardships that Americans experienced during the Great Depression as authentic and true, had the power to reveal the roots of the social problems that caused these harsh conditions so as to affect meaningful and significant social change.[[79]](#footnote-79) Couch shared these commitments by positioning life histories as a form that could document the challenges of life in the South directly through the voices of those impacted, with the added benefit of helping policy makers and scholars identify necessary reforms. The federal government’s embrace of documentary allowed for his idea to flourish.

The belief in the power of social documentary strongly impacted New Deal agencies, which embraced the documentary impulse. Photographers were employed in departments such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and National Youth Administration.[[80]](#footnote-80) The Farm Security Administration’s Historic Division, for example, was initially charged with documenting the need for and success of New Deal relief services as a project; it collected hundreds of thousands of photographs and become one of the most famous documentary photography projects of the 20th century.[[81]](#footnote-81) Government agencies sponsored documentary films such as Pere Lorentz’s *The Plough That Broke The Plains* for the Resettlement Administration.[[82]](#footnote-82) The Federal Writers’ Project embrace of what would be called the Southern Life History Project (SLHP) followed in line with such projects, but in new ways that challenged collection methods and writing genres.

**The Federal Writers’ Project**

Although smaller than its counterparts in Federal #1, the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) was established on July 27, 1935 under the direction of Henry Alsberg. The main goal of the project was to employ white collar workers such as historians, librarians, and writers to produce cultural products such as tourist guide books, often with a focus on the unique traits of the nation.[[83]](#footnote-83) Project directors understood that they were in a position to shape ideas about American culture and belonging, and they set out to create a national culture that embraced pluralism.[[84]](#footnote-84) Writers documented everyday life across the nation and included some of the most prominent authors of the 20th century such as Ralph Ellison, Zora Neal Hurston, and Studs Terkel. While the FWP was under constant scrutiny from conservatives, the project garnered praise from cultural influencers. As one writer for the *New Republic* wrote, within the New Deal programs, the FWP may be “‘the most influential and valuable of them all.’”[[85]](#footnote-85)

Ironically, it was the financial and institutional flux of the FWP rather than stability that made the SLHP possible. The nexus of its struggles was with the American Guide Series, which became the raison d'être of the agency and one of its most famous projects. Premised on the mobility provided by newly affordable automobiles and the success of guidebooks in Europe, FWP administrators reasoned that carefully researched and written guides could inspire Americans to “See America” by enticing them to explore the interesting stories and beautiful vistas that were in their own backyard.[[86]](#footnote-86) For a nation fractured by the failures of the Great Depression, the Guidebooks became a site to celebrate the state and regional differences that made up America. Each book was to comprise a part of a metaphorical national library, which collectively provided a portrait of a nation.[[87]](#footnote-87) Such guides would celebrate a new pluralistic vision of America, while helping the economy recover through consumerism.

Officially launched in 1936, the hopeful promise of the project caused it to quickly expand to include plans for books about regions and cities with over 400 volumes, many of which featured descriptive essays on topics such as history, labor, and social habits as well as tours designed to be taken by automobile. The FWP administration believed that the magnitude of research needed to complete the Guidebooks required a tiered approach. City offices were created to research local history and culture, state bureaus coordinated the local efforts and served as editors, and the central headquarters in Washington, D.C. oversaw the whole project. While state directors could suggest projects, all initiatives and goals had to be approved by the administrators in the nation’s capital. Such a multi-tiered structure grew quickly, topping out at over 6,000 people within the first year. However, the system also created tension among the different stakeholders at each level who often disagreed over who was best fit to determine what constituted local culture and how to represent it: an institutional challenge the SLHP would have to navigate as well.

It was in these conflicts over authentic culture and representation that the intended audience of the Guidebooks became clear - middle and upper class, White Americans who had the funds to travel to “see America.” The suggested tours and discussion of local cultures in the Guidebooks often used stories of “local color” to exoticize immigrants and African Americans, as well as erasing how people of color could (and could not) travel through these American routes - a testament to the culture of segregation of the era. The Negro Motorist Green Book created in 1936 by the Victor H. Green & Company brings the racialized lens and audience in stark relief.

African Americans used these “Green Books” not as a celebration of American pluralism but as savvy strategies to navigate violent terrains of whiteness in order to move safely throughout the United States.[[88]](#footnote-88) The erasure and/or exoticizing of race and culture in the Guidebooks became a dominant trope due in large part to the reliance on local White writers and the exclusion of African American writers, which was often a source of tension among local offices, especially in the South, and at the central headquarters in Washington, D.C., which housed the FWP’s Office of Negro Affairs.[[89]](#footnote-89) The audience identified by the American Guide Series would mostly go unquestioned in the SLHP; however, what the SLHP would not embrace was a celebratory tale of American progress and pluralism given the economic systems of inequality that shaped Southern life.[[90]](#footnote-90)

**Launching the SLHP**

The opportunity for the creation of the SLHP came during the reorganization of state bureaus under regional offices in 1937. The FWP sought to streamline the reporting hierarchy in order to expedite the completion of the Guidebooks and to reduce the ever-growing number of conflicts between state-level workers and D.C. FWP officials were particularly keen on speeding up the process to get the Guidebooks to print as there was growing discontent by many politicians over the costs of such New Deal projects. It was in this reshuffling that Alsberg brought Couch into the project.

Because of his far-reaching knowledge of the Tar Heel state’s culture and history as Director of UNC Press, Couch was called on to consult on North Carolina-focused projects, ultimately leading to his position as the Associate Director of the N.C. Writers Project. Couch’s editorial prowess and vast network of acclaimed writers and scholars quickly gained him recognition from DC, especially from Henry Alsberg. With the reorganization of the FWP, Couch moved into a central leadership position as the Regional Director of the Southeast states, including Alabama, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, at the bequest of Alsberg.[[91]](#footnote-91) With one foot in the federal government and one foot in academia, as the director of the South’s most prominent press, Couch was in a position to pursue his new approach to documenting social lives. His approach helped to move the Southeast region of the FWP away from the American Guidebooks, which used the genre of travel guides to create authorial expertise about place and culture, to what he saw as a new literary genre. He would come to call this genre “life histories” as they relied on Southerners’ own stories about their lives to portray ideas about the culture of the South.

While Couch shepherded the Guidebooks with great care in his new role, his passion was solving the problems of the American South, which was not the goal of Guidebooks that aimed to celebrate and entice readers to celebrate America through leisure and consumerism. Instead Couch was interested in intervening in debates over how to capture and document social life that emerged from sociology’s use of numbers and statistics often procured through surveys, anthropology’s method of ethnography, folklore’s privileging of first-hand stories, and the increasingly broad category of “social documentary” used by artists and authors. Couch questioned how fields such as sociology reduced social conditions to statistics and thereby squandered an opportunity to actually share the experiences of people through narrative storytelling written for a broader reading public.[[92]](#footnote-92)

He was also critical of folklore’s romanticization of the quotidian at the expense of investigations of larger structural social issues; a process that also often reduced people’s lives to nostalgia and quaint folkways that reified the anti-modern and simple-minded stereotypes of the region. While he was persuaded by the descriptive writing that ethnography used to document a subject’s surroundings, he felt this method privileged the voice of the scholar over the research subject. In line with social documentarians, he argued that new methods were needed to accurately illustrate people’s lived realities, and for him this meant combining academic concepts with literary expression to identify the conditions of the South in order to assess how to address the region’s challenges. Therefore, Couch quickly began to use his position and political capital to advocate for the creation of just such a new project in the FWP.

“Somehow they must be given representation, somehow they must be given voice and allowed to speak, in their essential character,” Couch argued. If they could speak, he reasoned, communities could help reshape how the nation understood them. In order to capture the voice of the people in their own words, he proposed that the FWP develop a new method of social documentation called “life histories” that could then be used to document the voices of Southerners. He believed that such stories would be of great interest to a general readership already primed by the literary marketplace to purchase stories about the South. Unlike the Southern Literary Renaissance though, life histories could paint a richer and more nuanced picture of Southern life that, Couch hoped, could spark the type of social change he saw as necessary to address the issues plaguing the region.

According to Couch, these stories would offer “a human point of view” through written narratives that revealed the interviewee as a “living person who has a past and present” rather than reduced to a few data points in a series of statistics that treated “subjects as abstractions” as often practiced by IRSS scholars and the quantitative school of Sociology.[[93]](#footnote-93) The life histories could then be published by UNC Press, just like the North Carolina Guidebook. “It is clear to anyone who has had experience in presenting materials to the reading public, namely the publisher or editor of a newspaper or the head of a publishing firm, that material of this kind will be of interest to the public and will be read if it is made available in good form,” Couch wrote with confidence.[[94]](#footnote-94)

**“Life Histories”**

While Couch’s relationship with Odum had soured by 1938, in large part due to intellectual differences, he did not categorically dismiss the social sciences.[[95]](#footnote-95) Rather, Couch believed in the goals of the field, but not the methods in which to document social conditions. While often based on mixed methods such as case studies, interviews, and social surveys, the broad generalizations published by sociologists overlooked an opportunity to capture social truths about a community through the vividness and intimacy of individual stories. In order to seize such an opportunity, he argued “life histories” should not just be data for social scientific generalizations about communities, but a way of knowing communities that would be available to the broader public.

He drew inspiration for the “life histories” from Rupert Vance, who began as Odum’s doctoral student and moved to a faculty position in the Institute alongside Odum. In *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South,* Vance argued that “the warmth of an emotional interest in the South has as far as possible been restrained by an appeal to the cold and impartial fact. It must be admitted, however, that the great human nexus surrounding cotton culture is too intricate to be set forth adequately by statistics and cases.”[[96]](#footnote-96) Vance used a case studies approach to counter the flattening of cultural complexity produced through statistical generalizations that reduced people to averages and (stereo)types. To create such “emotional interest,” Vance wrote detailed, third-person stories about a number of his research subjects that were then used to argue about the ways that “cotton culture” structured Southern society.

One case study above the others captured Couch’s imagination, which, interestingly, Vance did not conduct himself.[[97]](#footnote-97) Vance adapted journalist Ben Dixon MacNeil’s interview with an “ordinary poor white tenant,” published in the *Raleigh News and Observer* on September 25, 1921 into a case study under the pseudonym “John Smith.” In his book, Vance argued that the interview was an “unusual type of feature story” for a newspaper and that an article written by a non-sociologist made “a vivid presentation of one human factor in cotton.”[[98]](#footnote-98) However, the story was seen as exceptional by Vance as it was unusual for those without sociological training to create the type of story that could be considered evidence in a sociological study. Classifying the story as exceptional provided Couch with further evidence that the sociological gaze was too abstract and distant to accurately and intimately document the lives of everyday people, particularly the working class.[[99]](#footnote-99) Nevertheless, the value of the story to Vance proved to Couch that an individual’s history and contemporary conditions—written with non-academic prose by persons with no sociological training—were of value to academia. Writers from other fields such reporting, like MacNeil, were a better fit, for they could write for a broader public.

Couch used John Smith’s case study as an archetype, rather than as exceptional, for the SLHP. In outlining the new project to FWP writers he explained that “no one has attempted to collect such material purely for its human interest, purely for the value of accurate portrayals of individual lives.”[[100]](#footnote-100) His attention to accuracy in portrayal led Couch to call this new type of methodological writing “life histories” as opposed to “case studies” or “case histories.” While case studies and case histories were common qualitative methods in sociology, life histories were not widely used expect among the Chicago School of Sociology. Couch disliked case studies and histories because he felt that they often created a composite view or a vague abstraction of people rather than focus on a single person’s life. Life histories, on the other hand, did focus on a single individual, but did so only to document deviance, which Couch believed was a significant shortcoming. He explained,

Life histories have had a partial use heretofore, for special purposes in the fields of sociology, and social work. In sociology the use has been restricted usually to segments of persons’ lives used to illustrate particular problems, such as problems of juvenile delinquency, adult criminality, and marital frictions. In no case, however, has the method been applied to representatives of the great body of people, allowing each person to tell his own story as it appears to him, including all those details which while deemed non-essential for sociological generalizations, nevertheless, portray in the realest sense the nature and quality of a man’s living…These discarded details, while not important for social diagnosis may well be the ingredients which actually color the man’s life as an individual. In this sense life histories are what the social worker hears before he begins to select what he deems relevant and necessary [underline original.][[101]](#footnote-101)

Therefore, Couch aimed to repurpose the life histories in four important ways. First, FWP life histories were not to focus on the deviant or maladjusted, but rather “representatives of the great body of people.” Second, life histories should center the perspective of the interviewee subject, allowing that person to define what was important in their own life. Third, a life history was not to be a 300 page report but constructed in a way to attract and keep the attention of a more general public, but rather aimed at the general public interested in understanding how people really lived.

Central to this conception was that federal writers who were not trained sociologists or social workers should collect the life histories. Rather than creating life histories to prove or disprove a particular point, which is what he understood as Vance’s primary goal, writers were instructed to capture “a human point of view corresponding closely with the point of view of the journalist,” he wrote.[[102]](#footnote-102) Like a journalist, the writers were to simply report back what they heard through informal interviews. From memory, the writer would then write a narrative that included the person’s oral history along with a description their current conditions.[[103]](#footnote-103) As one set of instructions stated, “In order for the interview to be successful, you should put at ease the person with whom you are talking and let him ramble on. Then you should hurry home and make your notes.”[[104]](#footnote-104)

The interviewers were given questionnaires that covered topics such as family and labor, which were to be treated as a general guide and not a checklist, so that interviewers could respond to the natural direction of the conversations. Because of this method of careful listening and privileging of the interviewees own voices, life histories served as a predecessor of a method that would become known as “oral history.” However, it was in the writing style that Couch encouraged, which instructed writers to occupy the gaze of journalist to document compelling stories that primarily featured the interviewee’s voice that the life histories truly became unique.

**Privileging Work in Life Histories**

Couch’s ambitions for the SLHP were extensive as he desired to forge a new genre while offering a picture of the South. In a letter to Alsberg outlining his plans, Couch wrote that material similar to Vance’s case histories “ought to be collected from every Southern state, from all types of tenants, sharecroppers, share renders, and renters, and ought to include all the most important types of farming.”[[105]](#footnote-105) Along with sociologists, he was joining a wealth of cultural workers, from journalists such as Jonathan Daniels, writers such as Erskine Caldwell, and photographers such as Marion Post Wolcott, concerned during the documentary decade with depicting rural Southern (and most often White) working class by capturing their “authentic” and “real” conditions.[[106]](#footnote-106) While photographers from the acclaimed FSA photography unit used cameras, Couch called the life histories “word pictures” and joined academics and journalists who relied on the pen, typewriter, and printing press. With the SLHP, Couch added the FWP among the institutions placing a microscope over the region.

Steeped in current debates over what to document and how, Couch quickly expanded the scope to other significant economic sectors, including mill workers, lumberers, miners, fishers, and service occupations, and topics such as eating and drinking habits, health and disease, and recreational facilities.[[107]](#footnote-107) His extensive list of topics represented the areas of social life that he and a plethora of researchers on the region, many of whom were published by UNC Press, saw as the greatest issues in need of remedy. Sharing the decade’s concern with working class (and mostly White) labor, Couch’s particular focus was documenting the lives of workers in the South by occupation, which emphasized the centrality of labor and positioned subjectivity as based on work. Such positioning provided the SLHP with a much needed niche among the many documentary projects in the FWP as layer 3 will discuss in much greater detail as well as worked against tired stereotypes characterizing residents of the South as lazy, idle and unproductive.

Such stereotypes were fueled by President Roosevelt’s declaration in July 1938 that “the South presents right now the nation's No. 1 economic problem—the nation's problem, not merely the South's.”[[108]](#footnote-108) Primarily a series of statistics mined from scholarship by researchers such as Odum and Vance, the *Report of Economic Conditions of the South* garnered national attention further amplifying efforts by politicians and intellectuals to increase the South’s economic vitality to ensure national economic recovery. Moreover, a focus on work and occupations also reflected the major preoccupation of the New Deal - putting America back to work and building an ecosystem of benefits to care for workers and the unemployed alike.

In addition to countering stereotypes, Couch believed that accurate stories about these problems would constitute an important step for Southerners, themselves, to address the issues they faced. He argued that President Roosevelt and the New Deal “can do little for us if we refuse to do anything. It is our interest to know in detail all the important truths, pleasant and unpleasant about ourselves and our land; and Southerners who attempt to obscure these truths are doing themselves and the South the greatest possible damage.”[[109]](#footnote-109) For Couch, life histories would present Southerners and the nation with precisely such important truths.

While Couch was focused on telling “the important truths” of the South, it was very much a story based in whiteness with little critical investigation of the profound impact of slavery and segregation on non-White Southerners. For example, despite all of his concern with new documentary methods, he never took on the significant work undertaken by Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and James Agee who posed pointed questions about positionality and privilege in documentary practices.[[110]](#footnote-110) This lack of critical reflection about the relationship between race, gender and power permeated the structure of SLHP from hiring decisions, interviewing practices, and in the writing and editing of the life histories themselves, which we address further in Layer 3 and Layer 4. Nonetheless, the SLHP believed the pursuit of more accurate, authentic documents would not only benefit the south, but be a new method of documentation.

**Claims to Authenticity**

Concerns about authenticity, truth, and accessibility were at the forefront of the life histories method. Conveying the region’s truths meant forging an authentic and accessible practice and form. The challenge was how to accurately “portray individual lives” with “emotional interest” while allowing the person “to speak, in their essential character” to reveal “important truths” about Southern society and culture through writing. By attending to these critical issues, Couch and his colleagues hoped to lend authority, credibility, and legitimacy to the published life histories.

The process began with hiring “writers” and not academics. Among those hired included creative writers, journalists, secretaries, and educators with emphasis placed on hiring people who were from the region. Unlike the distant observation often privileged by the social sciences, the proximity of the writers to local communities was seen as an asset because they were tied into local networks and attuned to local history, customs, and politics. Their local knowledge was a resource rather than hinderance.

Once hired, writers were assigned topics and then charged with identifying interviewees, conducting the interview, writing the life history, and then editing based on feedback from staff in their state office and Couch. Much of the framing about how to conduct and write the life histories came from conversations between Couch and those he saw as the most skilled writers. In one such back and forth between Bernice Harris, who would become one of the most prolific life history writers, and Couch, he explained,

You may use your own judgement as to when to write your stories. You should not wait long enough to let details become vague and to get your stories mixed. I believe it is best not to wait long after you have collected material to write each story, but this is a matter on which I think it is best for you to use your own judgement. The one thing to remember here is that we do not want composite pictures. We do not want you to take the characteristics of several persons and put these together into one imaginary person. *We want the stories to be photographic in accuracy but, as you know, a good photographer is one who decides what is important and photographs that rather than trying to photograph everything* [emphasis mine].[[111]](#footnote-111)

Couch’s directions to Harris and the other writers belie a significant question underlying the project: how could authenticity be demonstrated through writing alone? Photographers working for the Department of Agriculture and Farm Security Administration used the camera lens as a way to demonstrate authenticity through the supposed truth represented in photographs.[[112]](#footnote-112) Folklorists documented songs and music with audio equipment allowing people to hear proof of authenticity. However, federal writers did not have cameras nor audio equipment, which was too expensive and cumbersome to use at the scale of the project. Nor was it necessary as they believed that the life histories could reveal truths through words, which represented a significant contribution to a decade bent on documenting the real.

This question about how to both create and demonstrate authenticity as well as what the form and specific methods of a life history looked like became areas of debate among Couch, SLHP administrators and writers. While Couch had larger idea about the potential of life histories as genre of documentation that could give insight into people’s lived experience in new ways that extended beyond the South, he had to contend with competing projects in the FWP vying for limited resources as well as the desires of state administrators and writers in the South. This complicated constellation of actors contributed to what became the little over 1200 life histories in the SLHP before it was forced to dismantle in the end of 1939. Layer 3 now turns to exploration of this process of negotiation over the new genre of a life history through the use of mapping techniques that visualize the collection as scale.

Layer 3: Defining Life Histories and Qualified Writers

**Introduction**

The Southern Life Histories Project emerged at a turning point in the Federal Writers’ Project. The guidebooks for each state had been largely drafted and were beginning the publication process. With the flagship project well underway, FWP administrators sought new projects. FWP Director Henry Alsberg and his Washington team were particularly interested in projects that promoted a pluralistic vision of the US. As a result, the FWP launched several new initiatives including Social-ethnic Studies and the Folklore Project.[[113]](#footnote-113) The Social-ethnic surveys were designed to understand the acculturation process of foreign "others" residing in the US. On the other hand, the Folklore project drew on anthropological ideals to document beliefs and customs that were thought to be unique to American culture and in danger of fading away in a rush to modernize the nation.

Amid this clamor to create new documentary efforts, William Couch, now Director of the FWP's Southeast Region, lobbied to add the life histories project to this list. Couch received approval from Alsberg in October 1938. In a letter to all state directors, Alsberg offered his enthusiastic support for the project and its potential to produce a large amount of material to aid in studying the current conditions in the American South.[[114]](#footnote-114) Through the end of 1939, the SLHP collected and wrote over 1,200 life histories, an impressive feat given the fact that the actual methods of collection and writing conventions were not established at the onset.

Mapping the locations of the interviews tells a story about the reach and limitation of these life histories. Exploring the collection of maps provokes several questions: Why do the life histories tend to clump together in specific areas? Why are interviews of people from common professions spread out over the region? Why do most writers only collect interviews in a small area? Why were most of the life histories written by women? Why were there only 7 Black writers? Why were the vast majority of interviewees White, a small amount Black, and almost no other races represented in the collection of the life histories?

Understanding the complicated rhetorical ecosystem in which the life histories were produced helps to address these questions. Washington-based FWP administrators desired to create a more pluralistic understanding of national identity through documentary projects. The SLHP had to compete for limited resources with the Social-ethnic and Folklore projects. Couch hoped to use life histories as a new documentary genre to address the social problems in the South. SLHP administrators had conflicting visions of the method needed to collect life histories. SLHP writers held their own prejudices as they were sent out to capture and create a new method of documentation that they had never seen before.

In this layer, we investigate this complex ecosystem by focusing on the factors that influenced the types of interviews the SLHP produced, where the interviews were conducted, and the writers chosen to collect the interviews. Moving back and forth between the map and archival evidence, we show how efforts to differentiate the SLHP's mission from other federal projects and academic disciplines shaped its version of the American South as defined through occupation and against a racialized Black/White binary. Moreover, the scope and method of a life history – as a document capturing a person’s “own story as it appears to him” or her – determined who was considered the best person to write the story.[[115]](#footnote-115) Again relying on a Black/White binary to define capable writers, White women came to dominate this space alongside White male writers while the SLHP segregated both male and female Black writers to the margins.

**Social-ethnic Studies and Race**

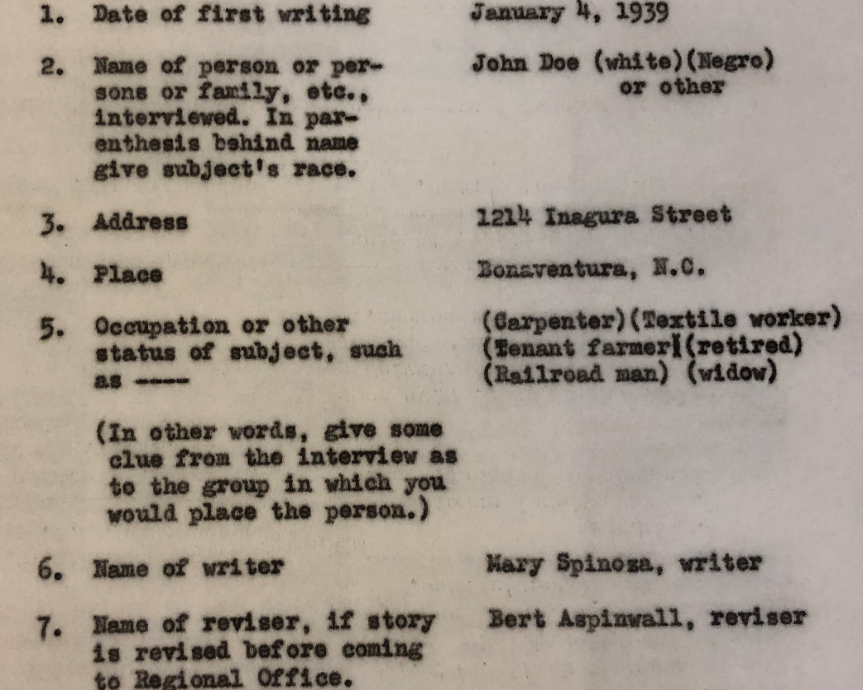
The map of interviews reveals that most SLHP interviewees were situated along a Black/White binary. In total, 891 of the interviews were conducted with White interviewees and 271 with Black interviewees. Also included were a small number of other racialized groups, which would be considered ethnic categories by contemporary terms. These include 9 Cuban interviewees, 50 Greek interviewees, 1 Spaniard, and 1 Chinese interviewee.[[116]](#footnote-116) Moreover, the location of these racial and ethnic groups is also interesting. While White and Black interviewees seem to spread out amongst each state in the Southeast region, some ethnic groups are largely located in specific areas. For example, all of the Cuban interviewees are located in Hillsborough County, Florida. This striking pattern raises the questions of why the SLHP decided to classify racial categories in this way and why the project largely ignored the many other racial, ethnic, and indigenous groups who lived in the area. To understand one reason why the interviews break down this way by race, we need to consider the ways the project needed to distinguish its mission from Social-ethnic Studies.

The Social-ethnic Studies project began shortly before the SLHP and was led by Dr. Morton W. Rayse, a Harvard sociologist. Rather than focusing on an individualized life, the Social-Ethnic studies project was concerned with documenting “the life of ethnic groups in various communities, including their cultural backgrounds and activities” through “intensive studies of single groups, cross-sectional studies of whole communities, and extensive studies of larger areas.”[[117]](#footnote-117) Moreover, while field workers were encouraged to use their community affiliation to gain entrance into the communities of study, the tenor of the project was scholarly and decidedly social scientific. In the Manual for Social-ethnic Studies, Rayse directs field workers to collect “field data, including selected interviews, personal histories, and documentary material” as well as fully cooperate with “consultants drawn from the ranks of State writers, historians, folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists, economists, etc.”[[118]](#footnote-118)

Rayse positioned the project as providing evidence of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nature of the United States, which FWP administrators argued should be seen as a national strength. He explained that the project's goal was to embrace "the history and role of nationality groups in modern industrial society...to present a composite picture of America," while taking care "not to overstress the separateness and peculiarities of a group. The aim was to show how the group functions in the life of the community...and how it contributes to cultural diversity.”[[119]](#footnote-119)

SLHP administrators used the Social-ethnic Studies’ focus on data collection of entire ethnic communities and embrace of the scholarly community as their primary audience as a way to strongly distinguish their project. One distinction was the kind of data collected. Rather than quantitative social survey data, SLHP would focus on collecting qualitative stories of individuals from their own point of view, focusing on Southerners. SLHP writers were documenting the interviewee’s articulation of their experiences, not writing about them. They viewed the Social-ethnic Studies' purpose as documenting the unique and unusual aspects of American society and culture, rather than the "common" American. North Carolina State Director Bjorkman explained to his writers that these other projects "deal with communities of an exceptional type that deviate in their origins and customs from the more common types of American life.”[[120]](#footnote-120) In contrast, the SLHP was to focus on these "common types," or as Couch put it, "the kind of life that is lived by the majority of people in the South.”[[121]](#footnote-121)

To document and organize these common types, SLHP administrators instructed writers to document demographic information relating to the interviewee. This information constitutes important metadata for each interviewee that worked to mark which common type the person's life history spoke to. In a memorandum to all state directors, Walter Cutter (Assistant Regional Director) states, “It is requested that hereafter the following heading be placed on all stories: [[122]](#footnote-122)



**The header of a life history.**

Instructing writers to collect this specific metadata as a heading before the life histories begins to frame the entire interview within these categories. The interviewee's name is to be read with their race, followed by their location and occupation. Therefore, before the location in the South is demonstrated or the specific occupation, race is marked as a signifier of the interviewee's name. Moreover, the writer is given three possible racial categories: "white," "Negro," or "other." This categorization inscribes a Black/White binary onto the racialized system in the South. Anyone whose racial categorization did not fall into this binary were grouped as "other". The approach erased ethnic and indigenous communities that did not fall within this binary.[[123]](#footnote-123)

Additionally, this framing of Southern identity through a Black/White binary also supports the distinction between the SLHP and the Social-ethnic Studies. SLHP administrators effectively encouraged writers to avoid interviewing subjects from different ethnic, indigenous, or other racial communities as that was considered the purview of the Social-ethnic Studies. Understanding the efforts that the SLHP made to distinguish itself from the Social-ethnic Studies helps to explain why the data revealed in the map shows an absence of communities from diverse racial, ethnic, and indigenous communities. 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. At the same time, additional ethnic and indigenous communities were ignored.

As the life histories began to flow into Chapel Hill, Couch sought to expand the project's reach. "For the present it has been decided to delay work in the South on the Social-ethnic Studies and to concentrate on the life histories," he wrote.[[124]](#footnote-124) The pause made space for the life histories project to reach out to communities once the other project's primary domain. He then instructed, “In selecting persons and families to use as subjects of life histories, use whites, Negroes and members of any other racial groups. We must have life histories that reveal the way people in the South live, and Negroes and members of other racial groups are people just as well as whites.”[[125]](#footnote-125) He has heard the criticism of colleagues such as Sterling Brown, editor of Negro Affairs in the FWP and whose job was to make sure Black voices were included. However, the inclusion of Black voices extended to their role as interviewees, but not writers, as the map demonstrates.

**Folklore and a Focus on Occupation**

Mapping the occupations associated with the life histories reveals a core set of professions that are captured across the American South. Together there are over 200 farmers, over 80 mill and textile workers, and nearly 60 housewives. Along with these most common trades, there are dozens of interviews with cooks, fishermen, and preachers. Mixed in with these large categories are one-off stories showing the wide range of professions available in the region, such as life histories from one peanut vendor, an embalmer, a preacher, and even a self-proclaimed “loan shark.”[[126]](#footnote-126) 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. To understand why the SLHP focused so heavily on economic conditions, it is useful to consider its relationship to the FWP’s Folklore Project.

The Folklore Project of the FWP was launched in 1936 and was initially led by John Lomax. It focused on the collection of oral material such as songs, stories, and dialect.[[127]](#footnote-127) The project saw folklore as consisting of ideas and customs transmitted by communities by word of mouth. Unlike other modes of expression, such as newspapers and books, folklore was seen to be outside of academic and commercial modes of dissemination.[[128]](#footnote-128) The SLHP initially had chosen to distinguish itself from the Folklore Project by focusing on documenting an individual's history that led to their contemporary circumstances, rather focus on stories from the past. This distinction, however, became insufficient when the Folklore Project was reorganized under the Direction of Benjamin Botkin in early 1938.

As a professor of English at the University of Oklahoma and trained in English literature departments, Botkin brought "a literary sensibility" to the study of folklore and refused the traditional configuration of folklore studies as just an approach to preserving the past.[[129]](#footnote-129) Shaped by the field of anthropology, he viewed folklore as also an ongoing process in the here and now that offered sights into contemporary life rather than a field defined by the search for some “pure, uncontaminated lore” as traditional folklorists often did.[[130]](#footnote-130) Folklore, in other words, was also responding to and offering insights into how communities were navigating the present, from the economic impact of the Great Depression to the effects of industrialization to questions about local, regional, and national identity.[[131]](#footnote-131) They were not just documenting stories to understand past beliefs, norms, and values, but instead a lens into contemporary culture. Guided by the belief that every group[[132]](#footnote-132) had folklore, the project also supported FWP officials' effort to document and circulate an indigenous culture, which could serve as the evidence of a national identity at a time when faith in the nation was fragile.[[133]](#footnote-133)

The expanded scope of the Folklore Project was met with approval from FWP administrators, who understood the work of the Folklore Project and the Social-ethnic Studies as complementary. In fact, the FWP hoped that the same field workers would collect material for both the Folklore project and Social-ethnic Studies. As the Manual on Social-ethnic Studies explained, “The Social-ethnic studies deal with the whole life of a group or community, including cultural backgrounds and activities: the folklore studies deal with a body of lore in relation to the life of a group or community.”[[134]](#footnote-134) Folklore was understood as demonstrating how cultural traditions and beliefs were built and handed down over generations. They were another component that could further shed light on Social-ethnic communities and the nation at large and vice-versa.

To accomplish their goals, the Folklore Project sent field workers to collect "personal stories" from individuals. To capture folklore, Botkin believed fieldworkers should begin by asking informants about their personal histories. When interviews progressed well, these individual stories would expand to capture the experiences, histories, and even fantasies of entire communities. By engaging directly in the process of telling and re-telling these stories, interviewees were uniquely positioned to witness and capture entire folk histories.[[135]](#footnote-135) Asking for personal histories was an avenue for collecting folklore. The person’s history offered a frame for understanding the context that created and circulated a piece of folklore. These materials were envisioned both to document as well as be mined for folk culture.

This framework of folklore was also used to segregate folklore from Black people as a sub-branch within the project. In a memorandum to state directors, Alsberg announced the creation of a sub-project under folklore he labeled “negro-lore,” which was concerned with “Negro life throughout the country, Negro folklore…highlights of Negro history and activities” as well “the collection stories of ex-slaves.”[[136]](#footnote-136) Partitioning Black folklore apart from the rest of the American folklore project, together with grouping folklore and history, demonstrates a common move within Jim Crow logic that segregated and othered Black history and experiences.[[137]](#footnote-137) Moreover, Couch saw this concern with stories of formerly enslaved persons as falling outside of the scope of the SLHP. He wrote to state directors, “In the life histories the emphasis is on the present and the past is treated only to throw light on the present. Ex-slave stories that relate mainly to the past will not be acceptable as life histories.”[[138]](#footnote-138) With this framing, Couch effectively positioned ex-slaves interviews as only being relevant to the SLHP if they talked about how slavery affected their present situation. This logic sheds even greater light on the content of Black life histories, since writers were effectively encouraged to gloss over details of slavery. Couch would continue to use this interest in contemporary social conditions as a defining factor in the SLHP.

Botkin's use of personal histories to gain insight into folklore meant that Couch had to be clear about how the SLHP documented unique and valuable information. To do this, Couch made two important moves in framing the project. First, he positioned the project as focusing on the South's occupation sectors by drawing on the national concern that the South was not sufficiently progressing with economic reforms. Second, Couch drew on sociology, despite his frustrations with the field. He believed that he could take a common method in the field known as case studies and transform them into readable stories published in the form of books for a reading public, which meant a primarily White affluent audience.[[139]](#footnote-139) The focus on *what* and *how* became key to arguments about the purpose and novelty of the SLHP.

To distinguish Botkin's use of personal histories to gain insight into folklore from the SLHP, Couch used a sociological frame to argue that life histories were concerned with documenting social structures such as education, family, and health rather than culture such as beliefs, ideas, and values. Yet, like Botkin and the field of Sociology from which he adapted his method, he believed the individual stories, what he called "word pictures", could be put together to draw a composite album of a social group. Given the constraints also shaped by their relationship to the Social-ethnic Studies as well as national concerns about the state of the South, the SLHP focused on “common types” in the region organized by occupational sectors.[[140]](#footnote-140)

By focusing the scope of the project on occupational types, Couch believed that the project would be able to address the source of the social problems in the South. As discussed in Layer 1, President Roosevelt defined the South as "economic problem #1," which exemplified how the South was thought of as having social problems that both led to the Great Depression and prevented the region from more quickly recovering. While Roosevelt's framing suggests that it was the social issues that led to economic problems, many Southern progressives, especially the Regionalists in Chapel Hill, as well as progressives in national offices in the FWP saw the causation as flowing in the opposite direction: economic problems caused the social issues in the South. The proposal of capturing people's life histories from specific occupational sectors was thought to be one way to gain insight into the common problems faced by these workers. In discussing the value of the life histories, Couch explains, "this material makes clearer than ever before the problems which have been faced in this region, and illuminates, almost startling, the human factors and interests involved. It seems to me that knowledge of such material is basic to any real understanding of our problems and people.”[[141]](#footnote-141)

This emphasis on the economic systems that cause social issues falls in line with a sociological framework as opposed to the Folklore’s project focus on recording cultural forms drawn from anthropological approaches. However, rather than a broad representation of all different social types and classes across occupational sectors, other SLHP administrators crafted a much narrower frame by emphasizing the need to document what they called “common” and “typical” workers. Eudora Richardson, State Director of Virginia, similarly instructed her writers,

Try to interview workers who may be considered typical, such as a man who packed up his family and belongings and came from a small farm, hoping to earn a better living in industry; a former share-cropper who wants more ‘cash money’ from his mill job; a ‘floater’ or transient worker from another industrial section; a believer in union organizations; an opponent of unions; a leader among women workers’ a worker who is looked on as a spokesman for the employer point of view; local persons who now have their first industrial job.[[142]](#footnote-142)

Richardson equates a broader interest in occupation with specific types of workers. This equation is significant as these instructions tell writers how to define Southern workers through the “typical” types worthy of documenting. These typical Southern workers are positioned as primarily coming from either agriculture or industry with a keen desire to work despite economic and market forces subverting their efforts to gain employment. To argue that these were typical stories across the American South, the SLHP needed to collect similar stories from people all across the region. Hence, we see interviews from various professions, most notably farmers and industrial labor, across the region.

This brings us back to the embalmer and preacher. A major focus was on agriculture and industrialization, as the occupation filter on the map indicates. With the project’s prioritization with the FWP, the scope expanded to include more occupations, which helped paint a broader picture of the region. Even with the expanded focus, though, documenting the "typical" version of each specific type of worker remained the goal. So, they collected several life histories to find the best example. Combined with the need to navigate in relation to the Social-ethnic Studies, the SLHP produced this album of word pictures of “typical” workers through a Black/White binary.

**Sociology and the Configuration of a Life History**

Whereas the map of occupations illustrates the goal of capturing a core set of professions from all across the region, the map showing where individual writers took life histories provides a different pattern. Each writer, with very few exceptions, only conducted life histories in a narrow geographic region. The map shows, for example, W. O. Saunders’ focus on the North Carolina coast, W. W. Dixon’s work near Columbia, South Carolina, and Barbara Berry Dorsey’s collection of life histories near St. Petersburg, Florida. In most cases, the regions of focus for each writer also correspond to where a writer lived. Writers were constructing life histories within their own geographic community. Whereas the focus on occupations was spurred by the desire to distinguish the SLHP from the Folklore Project's anthropological questions, the desire to have local writers can be understood as a desire to differentiate life histories from those prevailing methods that dominated Sociology.

As the larger field of Sociology, Couch looked past the work of Du Bois and the Atlanta School to center his arguments in relation to the Chicago and Chapel Hill schools.[[143]](#footnote-143) By the 1930s, certain schools of sociology had canonized works such as Florian Znanieckian and William I. Thomas’s *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918). They were credited with the shift from a philosophical to a scientific approach grounded in empiricism because of their use of "human documents", which included introducing a new form of qualitative data that they called a life history. Works such as Shaw’s *The Jack-Roller* (1930) further popularized empirical American sociology and the life history method.[[144]](#footnote-144) The life history method became a popular form of evidence for case studies, which were conducted among a person or particular group by a social worker or sociologist, even often resulting in life histories being called case histories.

By the mid-1930s, they were a common method in Sociology, primarily associated with social work and the emerging field of criminology.[[145]](#footnote-145) “So closely related are these various kinds of case studies that it is impossible, for all practical purposes, to draw a clear-cut distinction between a case study, a case study, a case history, and a life history of an individual”, wrote UNC Sociology Professor Katherine Jocher in 1928 for *Social Forces*. The slippage between terms in the field meant that the method, and debates over the method, were often under the more popular terms of “case histories” and “case studies”. This was the case for Rupert Vance, Couch’s primary interlocutor and from whom he drew inspiration for the life histories.

To capture stories of “typical” Southern workers, Couch and SLHP administrators found Sociology’s case studies intriguing. However, Couch did not think the increasingly favored statistical and data-driven approaches in sociology could motivate a general readership to learn about the social problems in the South or social problems in general. They abstracted not only the people but the problems and missed an opportunity to persuade people into action. Instead, he saw promise in the case study approach, specifically the method of life histories, if this method could be repurposed for a popular audience and to focus on common types rather than those defined as deviant.[[146]](#footnote-146)

Case studies “are technically written for a technical audience” and “restricted usually to segments of persons’ lives used to illustrate particular problems, such as problems of juvenile delinquency, adult criminality, and marital frictions,” he wrote.[[147]](#footnote-147) Instead, Couch argued for a different purpose and reader. Rather than focusing on “deviant” segments of the population, he was interested in “representatives of the great body of people” in which each person would tell “his own story as it appears to him including all those details which while deemed non-essential for sociological generalizations, nevertheless, portray in the realest sense the nature and quality of a man’s living [underline original].”[[148]](#footnote-148)

Additionally, Couch objected to the assumption within the discipline that “only sociologists can get case histories that are worth getting.”[[149]](#footnote-149) Instead, he believed that non-academic writers would be better able to collect information from subjects because they are more closely related to the subjects' situations, especially writers from the South. Moreover, they would not have the disciplinary trappings of sociology, so they would be more open to relating the life history as the interviewee told it. Couch explains, "the approach to this subject by the workers on the Federal Writers' Project will be from a human point of view corresponding closely with the point of view of the journalist, except that certain simple techniques will be established and followed to ensure the greatest possible accuracy in the histories are collected.”[[150]](#footnote-150)

The entanglement with sociology was driven largely because of the initial purpose of the SLHP: to understand a sociological problem through empirical data. Yet, the kind of empirical data desired was not quantitative but qualitative. As the field of Sociology desired authority through becoming a quantitative social science, the SLHP would collect sociological data but through individual *stories* from the perspective of the *individuals themselves* that were meant to be read in aggregate to shed light on the social conditions of a region. While Couch’s ambitions for the SLHP far exceeded the immediate social issues of the region, for he hoped this “new literary genre” would animate other domains and find yet unknown purposes, the immediate concerns about the economic and, therefore, social health of the region deeply shaped the genre in formation.

As a result, the project became focused on two primary aims. One was to document the region in a particular configuration – through a Black/White binary categorized by occupation. The second was to forge a new literary genre for sociological knowledge for a broader public. In this case, they identified their primary audience as an affluent White audience beyond the academy, for their social and cultural power in US society made them powerful voices that shaped US social policy.

**A Focus on White Women Writers**

Looking at the map of writers shows that a significant amount of the life histories was written by women. In total, women made up slightly over half of the writing staff and produced over 60 percent of the recorded life histories. A large portion of the interviews was written by a small number of writers. There were 30 writers who wrote ten 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 (Robert McKinney), and 19 were White women. These 19 women wrote nearly 40 percent of the life histories. This small group of White women was responsible for shaping much of the collection.

Why were White women able to gain such a prominent position as writers in the SLHP? The key role of women writers in the project is particularly striking for a time when women were largely excluded from the workplace and had only been given the right to vote a mere two decades earlier. Two notable causes pushed the SLHP to use women writers so prolifically. First, gendered notions that associate women with the domestic sphere made them better able to gain access to interviewees within their homes and to make them at ease sharing their stories. Second, women were seen as good recorders of information due to their interest in communication and were increasingly favored for stenographer and secretary positions, which made them well-positioned to record interviewees' stories. [[151]](#footnote-151) Mostly male editorial staff would then change these notes into well-crafted stories.

While SLHP administrators framed the purpose of the life histories as providing an opportunity for the “people [to] speak for themselves,” it was never intended for the histories to be unmediated replications of the exact words of the interviewees as one might expect of oral history transcripts today.[[152]](#footnote-152) Instead, the SLHP writers and the editorial supervisors were responsible for turning the raw material from the interviewee into a life history with “literary excellence” that would be more “readable.”[[153]](#footnote-153) To achieve such literary excellence, Couch began the project by mandating that State Directors secure “the best qualified writers.”[[154]](#footnote-154) State Directors scoffed at such a directive because of the WPA requirement that 90% of writers be certified relief workers,[[155]](#footnote-155) arguing that good writers “were few and far between.”[[156]](#footnote-156) The State Director of Virginia, Richardson, went as far as to state, “There is no use deluding ourselves. There is not a relief worker on our staff that can produce a life story that is worth publishing.”[[157]](#footnote-157)

Couch was generally quite frustrated with this complaint from state directors, seeing the problem of securing good writers as a result of the hiring practice. He wrote, “I am practically certain relief rolls contain many persons who can write, that individuals frequently do not know their own abilities, that officials consulting applicants for relief know little about discovering abilities, and that the failure to get on the project persons who can write is a consequence of the application of naive, primitive social work techniques.”[[158]](#footnote-158) Additionally, he argued that “I have found that if I take a little time to look around I can locate persons already certified or who can be certified who are able to do really valuable work.”[[159]](#footnote-159) While Couch’s approach of “looking around” for those who were able to do “really valuable work” as well as helping workers find their own abilities seems to be aimed at opening up the project to new writers that had previously been ignored, the actual hiring processes relied on raced and gendered notions of who was best qualified to capture stories of interviewees and who possessed necessary writing skill.

The SLHP specially selected a handful of White women for non-relief positions, the same female writers who would become the most prolific writers during the life of the project. Among these women were the two writers who wrote more life histories than any other writer: Bernice Harris with 85 life histories and Ida Moore with 51 life histories. Harris, an aspiring playwright and novelist, was recruited after reviewing her novel for publication at UNC Press. Harris had taken summer classes at UNC in English as well as Professor Frederick Koch, founder of the Carolina Playmaker.[[160]](#footnote-160) *Purlsane*, which was loosely based on Harris’ childhood in Mt. Moriah, North Carolina, detailed the life of a small rural community. In a letter trying to recruit her to the project, Couch wrote, “We want you to get stories of tenant farmers and small farm owners … There are several reasons for my thinking of you in connection with this work. First, I believe you can do it better than anyone else I can find and that the stories you write will be authentic and interesting. Second, I am extremely anxious for you to do more writing of the kind you have done in your volume of plays and in Purslane.”[[161]](#footnote-161)

While Couch clearly recruited Harris because of her writing experience and ability, he also hoped that she could use her connections in her town (Seaboard, NC) as leverage to gain access to people willing to give their life histories. Because her husband owned and operated a cotton gin, Harris knew many people in the farming community. Together with her connections in the community, Harris believed that she was well-positioned to put people at ease. She explained that together with the many economic problems in the region was "the need of the lonely and forgotten to tell *all* to a sympathetic listener [italics original].”[[162]](#footnote-162) Harris’ description of herself as a sympathetic listener reveals a gendered notion of who was better able to listen to people’s stories.

In addition to gendered ideas about women as more sympathetic listeners, women were also positioned as less threatening and thus more likely to gain entrance into communities thought to be resistant to interviews. Ida Moore's early work on interviews with mill workers demonstrated this ability. Couch hired Ida Moore in May 1938 as one of the first people to work on the life histories project in the position of a non-certified, non-security worker. In a letter advocating for her hire, he wrote, "we have in hand at present in typescript a novel of hers which has been read for us by about one-half dozen persons, all of whom have recommended it highly...Miss Moore has had two years of college work, has taught school, and has learned much in the last ten years from having to forage for a living for herself and several brothers and sisters. Of the persons whom I know, who are available for this job, I consider her the best.”[[163]](#footnote-163) Again, Couch understood Moore's college education and the existence of a manuscript as evidence of her writing skill, lower-class roots, and resourcefulness as attributes that would help her perform her job.

Couch did, in fact, test Moore’s abilities by asking her to conduct the first interviews with textile mill workers. According to Couch, many argued that “‘the effort to get stories from people living in textile mill villages would arouse suspicion and that any person attempting to get material would very likely be rejected. It was also said that the people would not talk.’”[[164]](#footnote-164) However, Moore “proved the job could be done” by collecting more than 28 life histories from mill workers. Moore did such a good job showing that life histories could be collected and written in the manner Couch desired that she wrote the manual on life histories, which was sent to all writers and administrators in the SLHP.

While Couch and other SLHP administrators in North Carolina looked to women as lead writers, other key state administrators, most notably James Aswell and William McDaniel in Tennessee, took a significantly different approach to their writers as they felt virtually none of them were capable of writing. McDaniel and Aswell did not create the space for the writers to evolve and define the genre but instead took it upon themselves to craft the stories. Complaining of the incompetence of the writers, Aswell wrote Couch, “We are handicapped by having no field workers who can write or know what to look for. I have to tear down each thing that comes in, reassemble it, and then send it back with detailed instructions for expansion...When the piece is returned (with blanks that we furnish filled out with physical description of the interviewed and the neighborhood), then the thing has to be cut, the dialogue made natural and often more material sent for to fill up the cracks in the continuity...The field workers themselves are often half-illiterates. While this has its obvious advantages, the disadvantages are also pretty heavy.”[[165]](#footnote-165) Despite the extremely condescending tone, Aswell and McDaniel did see some promise in three female writers, Nellie Gray Toler, Della Yoe, Ruth Clark, who ultimately were the three most prolific writers in Tennessee.

Though Couch took a different approach to administering life histories than McDaniel, Aswell, and other SLHP supervisors, White women played a central role in the SLHP. Women occupied these roles because of the gendered assumptions about their supposed superior abilities to listen and their demur position, which then allowed them to put interviewees at ease. Certain writers even used those assumptions to create space for their writing and approach to life histories, such as Bernice Harris and Muriel Wolff, two of the most prolific writers.[[166]](#footnote-166) While White women writers seized this opportunity to contribute to the SLHP, their Black female counterparts were denied. In fact, Black writers were systematically excluded from the project, even as efforts were still made to capture the life histories of Black interviewees. However, the ways in which Blackness was represented often corresponded to Jim Crow characterizations expected by a White audience, which we delve into in Layer 4.

**The Marginalization of Black Writers**

Looking at the map of non-White writers reveals that White writers wrote the vast majority of life histories. In total, 159 of the writers were White, 7 were Black, and there was 1 Chinese American writer who wrote a single life history.[[167]](#footnote-167) Such data seems to counter Couch's advice to state and local SHLP administrators, encouraging them to look around for local writers. Moreover, this data is inconsistent with greater FWP aims of including Black writers.

To increase Black representation in the ranks of the FWP, Alsberg created the Office of Negro Affairs, led by renowned poet and scholar Sterling Brown and state and local offices known as Negro Working Units.[[168]](#footnote-168) Yet these units were segregated, and often required workers to depend on Historical Black Colleges to find office space as they were forbidden to work in the same space as White colleagues. Brown worked hard to advocate for the inclusion of Black writers in all FWP initiatives.[[169]](#footnote-169) However, he consistently met resistance by White administrators. These administrators argued that they were unable to hire Black writers because of the requirements of segregation, the lack of writing skill, and the unwillingness of the Washington office to provide adequate resources for hiring.

Couch and the other SLHP administrators relied on structures of segregation, together with notions of writing skill and objectivity, to veil their racist hiring practices. When asked to explain why more Black people had not been hired, Bjorkman wrote to the office of Negro Affairs that not a single Black person had been hired in North Carolina because "the resources of the Writers' Project 'have not permitted the setting up of separate establishments, which would be required for such employment.’”[[170]](#footnote-170) Again relying on the argument of scarcity in resources that also effectively blamed Black writers, in a separate letter referencing his inability to hire Black writers, Bjorkman stated,

Efforts to do better in this respect have failed on account of the impossibility of finding members of that race capable of qualification for the project while certified on relief. The few employed have invariably had to be dropped after a short time because they did nothing at all...With a very small percentage of non-relief workers allowed to the project, and with such positions absolutely needed for the filling of directive and supervisory positions, it has been impossible to place any negroes in this class.[[171]](#footnote-171)

Following the almost exact same line of logic while also appealing to white supremacist sensibilities, Alabama state director Myrtle Miles stated, "'members of the race who are fortunate enough to have Institute training are not on relief,' 'it would be unwise to give a Negro this job...There is considerable racial sensitiveness in Tuskegee and vicinity.’”[[172]](#footnote-172) According to this logic, 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.

Couch echoed the argument of the inability to find Black writers but did so by appealing to a notion of colorblindness. Writing to Alsberg, he explained,

Since taking on the job of Regional Director I have found it necessary to spend a large part of my time working on the problem of improving the quality of personnel on state staff. I have not recommended or approved anyone for any non-relief position without first having definite evidence in the form of printed manuscript material as to his ability to write. I have held to this in dealing with white persons and I do not believe I should discriminate for or against Negros in this particular. There are no non-relief vacancies in North Carolina or on the Regional staff at the present time. On the Regional staff I have employed only those persons that I think have exceptional talent. Nothing would delight me more than to discover a Negro with exceptional writing talent, legally resident in the states with which I deal, and desiring to work on the Writers’ Project...I shall appreciate greatly any evidence that anyone can give me in locating Negros who are qualified for work on the Writers' Project in this region.[[173]](#footnote-173)

Couch’s argument to Alsberg assumed as given that there were not any good Black writers who qualified for relief and instead focused on the idea of hiring into the few allotted non-relief positions. In this case, he relied on racist structures of evidence that purport a type of objectivity and colorblindness to conclude that no Black writers could provide "evidence in the form of printed manuscript material" of "exceptional talent." Such reliance on printed manuscripts did not take into account inequalities in access to presses or higher education, not to mention his opaque definition of what constituted "exceptional talent."

Moreover, while Couch seemed to lament the fact that no one was helping him locate qualified Black writers, Irma Neal Henry, Consultant on Negro Affairs in North Carolina, was continually writing him with names and resumes of candidates with a college education and considerable writing experience.[[174]](#footnote-174) One candidate included Dr. Edward Farrison, who had a Ph.D. in English from Ohio State University and was a English and public speaking professor at Bennett College for 12 years.[[175]](#footnote-175) Additionally, he had published in several scholarly journals, including *The Journal of Negro History* and *The Crisis*. Despite the exceptional qualifications of Farrison, Couch claimed that while there were a number of jobs in which Farrison could “be very useful,” he did “not see any chance to increase the salaried staff.” In other words, there were no paid positions available for Farrison; however, Couch alluded to the fact that there may be a non-paid position available as he had worked with others who offered their assistance “on a voluntary, non-salary basis.”[[176]](#footnote-176) Therefore, even when Couch was presented with an extremely qualified Black candidate, he was not willing to make a non-relief position available, but would consider using his unpaid labor something most could not afford to give, not to mention the insult provided by such a suggestion.

In the end, Couch declared, “In the past two months I have spent several hours writing letters and having conferences over the matter of Negro employment on the North Carolina staff and the Regional staff. I feel that this time has been wasted......I do not feel that it is wise for me to spend time getting information about the qualifications of persons that might be employed unless there is a definite prospect of vacancies in which they might be used.”[[177]](#footnote-177) While Couch seems to blame the Washington office for lack of vacancies, it is clear that he was rarely willing to advocate for Black writers to occupy such non-relief positions. Moreover, Couch's argument about wasting his time is quite poignant given the fact that at the same time he was writing this, he was also berating the state directors for not "looking around" the community for writers who qualify for relief and approaching their personnel with the necessary "enthusiasm and understanding" necessary to discover the "the abilities of persons on their staffs.”[[178]](#footnote-178) Such a contradiction evidences the underlying racialized logic about which writers were worthy of the time necessary to help them discover their own abilities and allot non-relief positions to those with exceptional talent. This logic aimed to position White writers as more qualified to document and write life histories while disqualifying Black writers from working on the project.

**Conclusion**

Within the complex documentary ecosystem of the FWP, Couch and his fellow administrators carved out a space for the SLHP by creating a version of the life history method that was distinct from other sociological approaches. For the SLHP, life histories were written for a generalized audience by writers who were not trained academics. Most importantly, the FWP life history did not focus on deviance but rather common workers throughout the South. The interviewees were supposed to give their own perspective of their lives. The democratic ethos of the project resonated well with the larger FWP concerned with documenting real life as Americans lived it.

However, how the SLHP distinguished life histories from its two rival projects in the FWP (the Social-ethnic studies and Folklore) demonstrate that common workers actually fell into a Black-White binary. As a result, other ethnic and indigenous communities were seen as outside the scope of the SLHP. This Black-White binary was reproduced when the SLHP hired writers. White writers, particularly women, were seen as better positioned to capture true and authentic stories from interviewees. As Layer 4 discusses, the project’s purpose and the positionality of the writers necessarily shaped the content and form of the life histories.

Layer 4: Rhetorical Strategies and Representation

**Introduction**

A memorandum sent to Southern state offices on October 27, 1938, provided explicit feedback on an early collection of the life histories, explaining that “while these sketches are remarkably good for field reports, a few show a tendency towards overwriting. The most effective stories are those simply told—where the characters speak for themselves, with small assistance from the interviewer.”[[179]](#footnote-179) This editorial directive of letting “the characters speak for themselves” constituted the ethos of life histories and set it apart from other types of documentary writing. Sociology produced numeric summaries and case studies from the researcher's point of view, while literature tended to construct composite characters emanating from stereotypes, Couch argued. In contrast, life histories were positioned as stories that better captured the interviewee's actual voice, and therefore were more real, authentic, and accurate. However, the question of how to create these stories was very much up for debate as writers and editors grappled over how to write a short coherent, engaging story of a person's life that was in their own words.

In a little over one year, the SLHP would negotiate the final form of a life history. At the heart of this undertaking was a series of questions, including how to convey that the story told was authentic and real and in the interviews' own words. This provoked questions such as how the writer and interviewee's subjectivity should factor into the life history leading to a set of decisions about content, structure, and modes of representations to formalize the method. As a result, Couch, SLHP editors, and writers negotiated a set of practices and strategies that they believed produced a more authentic, legitimate, and insightful form of documentation. They came to understand themselves as creating “human documents” through “word pictures” that documented people’s stories. To create these human documents, they used a series of strategies that were understood as observational and therefore objective rather than as making arguments or judgments about society. They were to be the empirical data that could be mined and put together to reveal new aspects of American society.

Our digitized collection of life histories serves as a rich data source for investigating the forms and functions of the written records produced by the SLHP.[[180]](#footnote-180) Computational methods are used to augment and assist in a close reading of individual life histories. In this layer, we use two text-analysis techniques to help identify patterns within the collection of life histories. Following the terminology in corpus linguistics, each life history will be referred to as a “document.” Topic models are used to identify “topics”—groups of words that tend to occur together within the same documents. Document clustering is used to find groups of documents that tend to use a similar collection of words. Together, these techniques allow us to organize the lexicon of words and collections of documents in semantically meaningful ways that help identify and understand how a close reading of an individual life history relates to large-scale patterns. Further details of these techniques and how they were applied to the collection are given in the methods section. Links to topics and clusters of interest are included throughout the layer.

In this layer, we analyze the form of the life histories as written documents. The socially constituted systems they produced involved a dynamic network of players: writers, interviewees, editors, directors, and the Washington FWP office. Each of these contributed their own influences over the form of the life histories. By investigating the draft, edited, and final written documents produced within these systems, we identify how the SLHP sought to position the interviewees as authentic and real. This was achieved by using strategies such as beginning with descriptions of the home space to set the scene of the interview, privileging of first-person and quotations, and implementing written dialect to represent stereotypical notions of Blackness. The strategies positioned the writer as present, and often explicitly welcomed, to bear witness to the person’s story. The writer acted as a scribe, documenting the person’s story in their own words and style of speech. These features were designed to convey to the reader that they were hearing an interviewee's actual voice, which gave the life history credibility. The SLHP hoped these features would motivate them to identify and empathize with people in life histories.

**Understanding through “Human Documents”**

As discussed in Layer 3, the SLHP was able to carve out a unique place in the ecosystem of documentary projects in the FWP by positioning the project as concerned with capturing the life histories of “typical” Southern workers from an array of occupational sectors, thereby distinguishing it from the Social-ethnic and Folklore projects. Unlike the Social-ethnic Studies, the SLHP was not interested in documenting people's stories from what they defined as ethnic communities, but instead “typical” Americans, which came to be understood as those individuals who SLHP administrators and staff could identify as either Black or White. Moreover, the SLHP was careful to distinguish itself from the Folklore project viewing folklore as concerned with capturing fading artifacts of culture passed down orally from generation to generation, indebted to concepts in anthropology. Instead, the SLHP repurposed the qualitative method of life histories from Sociology. Life histories had been used in Sociology, but only to document those deemed too deviant as a way for researchers to understand how such delinquency was produced.[[181]](#footnote-181) Couch felt that such a focus on deviance missed life histories' true potential to serve as "human documents."

The SLHP's investment was less about proving that life histories were more or less scientific than other methods but rather a better way to understand and communicate the human condition. It was grounded in literature and documentary strategies rather than social science and written for a non-academic audience. Human-centric documents in the form of accessible, well-written stories were better positioned for understanding American communities, economic structures, and everyday life, they argued. In this way, Couch believed that life histories could reveal the “more significant aspects of the whole life experience, including memories of ancestry, written *from the standpoint of the individual himself*.”[[182]](#footnote-182) Ideally, readers would respond as Georgia FWP State Director Samuel Tupper did to Annie Rose's life history of Fannie Hopkins, "You have given the story a very human quality, and after reading it, I felt that I really had seen the woman."[[183]](#footnote-183)

Understanding people meant visiting, talking, and listening to individuals who, through their words, created in aggregate a more holistic picture of an aspect of society such as the economy, education, and political beliefs. Numerical summaries could never get at this complexity, for they obscured and removed the kind of evidence that, to the SLHP, was more legitimate, the actual words of people. The indexical approach mirrored the truth claims of photography. Like a photographer, the writer had to frame the scene and then record the light with their pen rather than a shutter. The image they created was to be, as SLHP administrators consistently repeated, a "word picture." Despite the strong belief in the necessity of creating a “word picture,” SLHP administrators did not have a clear understanding of the particular conventions involved other than the importance of demonstrating authenticity, which became the central concern behind discussions over the form of the life history.

**Instructions to Writers**

Because Couch and the other SLHP administrators did not have a clear understanding of the specific conventions and structure of life histories, the instructions given to the writers were both vague and contradictory. Writers were given a rough outline of topics to cover, including family, education, income, attitudes towards work and life, religion and morals, medical needs, diet, and the use of their time. The topic models indicate writers did use it as a guide. Many of the topics center on particular professions, one of the dominant subjects in the questions. For example, Topic 1 focuses on factories, Topic 3 on mills and barber shops, Topic 5 on insurance offices, Topic 14 on education, and Topic 15 on the law. These topics emerge because individual life histories tend to spend a significant portion of the interview discussing topics related to occupations and local industries. However, the instructions that accompanied this outline stated, “it is not desired that each life history or story follow this outline in a rigid manner… [the writer] may follow the whole outline or limit himself to a part of it.” [[184]](#footnote-184) As suggested by a lack of topics related to other questions, such as religion and morals, writers would also follow their interests.

When it came to the point of view, "it is immaterial whether the stories are written in the first, second or third person.” [[185]](#footnote-185) Additionally, the instructions stated to avoid generalities and the expression of judgment. Instead, the writer "must try to discover the real feelings of the person consulted and must record this feeling regardless of his own attitude toward it." Above all, the writer strives for "accuracy, human interest, social importance, [and] literary excellence.”[[186]](#footnote-186) These instructions left significant room for interpretation, and as a result, writers initially sent in a wide variety of stories, many of which Couch deemed inadequate. Therefore, he looked to a few writers such as Ida Moore to create models that could be emulated and began, in conversation with writers and editors, to narrow the possibilities and formalize the composition of a life history.

[Insert Image; Cover Page]

Figure #: The life history of Mary Rumbley conducted by Ida Moore.

Moore’s life history of Mary Rumbley, a White woman and former mill worker from Burlington, North Caroline (Figure #), became the primary example.[[187]](#footnote-187) While there are several life histories that share little in common with the conventions from Rumbley’s life history, text analysis methods that read the entire SLHP collection at scale reveal common trends that most of the stories used to create the genre of the life history, including setting the scene of the encounter between the writer and interviewee followed by significant use of block quotes to center the words of the interviewee. Together, these strategies were designed to realize a “method of writing life histories from the viewpoint of the person concerned” that fulfilled the goal of “life histories as a method of revealing people,” which Couch called for.[[188]](#footnote-188)

**No Space Like Home**

How to open a life history was an immediate challenge. While some of the life histories opened with the interviewee's words, others began with a description of the writer and how they came to share space with the interviewee. Given that writers were documenting another person's life history, not themselves, one might think that including the writer in the story would have been frowned upon. After all, these were to be word pictures from the interviewee's words. However, editors believed that by indicating that the writer and interviewee(s) were occupying the same space in which the interviewer was a mere recorder of information, the life histories could better solidify their claims to accuracy and authenticity and, therefore, as a way of knowing.[[189]](#footnote-189)

The writers indicated their presence while simultaneously cueing the reader into the interviewee's lived experience by setting the scene of the interview. As Assistant Regional Director Walter Cutter wrote to Bernice Harris:

We are trying to portray the lives of real people for other real people to read and consider. To do this, the person concerned should speak as much as possible, and the description of places, i.e., grounds, houses, rooms, and furnishing, should usually be restricted to that amount which will be sufficient to 'set' the scene and be absorbed naturally into the plan of the story. When there are two or three pages of description, before a single voice is heard, something of the vitality of the story as a human experience is lost.[[190]](#footnote-190)

Accordingly, writers began to dedicate the first few paragraphs to describe how they came to be in the interviewee's presence. It was not uncommon for a life history to start with a writer walking up to a home, greeting an interviewee on a porch who then invites them inside or finds the person and walks through the porch to the interior. Once inside, the writers described the conditions often in the form of an inventory of rooms and their objects. They list features on the exterior such as the porch and gardens and interior such as items in the home's living room and kitchen. Indicating welcomed access, proximity, and intimacy established that the writer was a reliable narrator and observer. Subsequently, once the initial scene of the interview was set in the introduction, the writers would quickly get out of the way of the interview, falling into the background to allow the interviewee's voice to dominate the remainder of the document. For example, this approach came to be seen in Moore’s life history of Rumbley. Moore recounts her initial encounter with Rumbley, describes the home space, and notes the physical appearance of Rumbley within the first two pages as a way to set the scene. She then only occasionally asks a question to maintain narrative clarity, allowing Rumbley’s story to take center stage.

In this way, Moore and her fellow writers drew on the cultural and social values and beliefs of certain spaces in early 20th-century culture, especially the domestic sphere, to make claims to intimacy while making social and economic class signals. By the 1930s, the home was understood as a private space where an invitation was required to enter. It was also a feminized space associated with female labor as well as intimacy.[[191]](#footnote-191) Attuned to the home's cultural and social connotations, writers were encouraged to conduct interviews inside people’s houses. The ability to enter the home—a place associated with the personal and private—indicated that the writer was getting one step closer to the person's interior world. Moreover, describing the home was a way to signal race and class to an imagined audience understand as possessing White middle-class sensibilities, a point that will be discussed in more detail below.

There was also a practical side. One benefit to the home was that people might be more at ease. A primary way of organizing who to interview was by occupation. Asking a mill worker questions about their job in front of their manager was a recipe for disaster. As Virginia Writers’ Project director Eudora Richardson wrote to writer Mary S. Venable, “Under no circumstances should you call on people in the place of employment or approach the officials of an industry. In every case, you should reach the men and women in their homes.”[[192]](#footnote-192) Together with these cultural and practical reasons, conducting the interviews in people’s homes demonstrated authenticity, access, and intimacy through admittance to the interior space of the home.

Given women's claims (or relegation) to the domestic sphere and therefore to access this space, a writer in a women's body became an asset rather than a hindrance. As demonstrated in Layer 3, White women writers were not only hired but produced a significant amount of life histories, often interviewing people from the communities they knew well. It was not only ideas about intimacy, access, and space that shaped their hiring but a trait that they believed lent truthfulness to the life history. Sharing space, particularly domestic space, bolstered claims that the writer could access a more authentic and informative life history.

**Point of View and Proximity**

While setting the scene was seen as an important move to signal the interview's authenticity and cue the reader into notions of race and class, it was not initially clear how to establish the writer's presence while making sure they didn't take over the whole frame. Central to establishing the writer's presence was the question of whose point of view the opening scene should be from.[[193]](#footnote-193) As writers and editors worked together to standardize the form, they settled on the use of first-person when setting the scene, as is the case with Rumbley’s life history. Moore writes, “*I* went to see Mary the other morning, a brisk October morning it was, and Mary was dropping a piece of coal on the fire when *I* opened the door in response to her ‘Come in”’[emphasis ours]. This initial scene is from Moore's point of view as she describes her first encounter with Rumbley, which began the interview.

By using “I” to represent the writer at the beginning of the life history, the writer proved they were actually inhabiting the space with the person they were interviewing, in turn, lending authenticity to the story that followed. Often, they even went to great lengths to prove that they were not only allowed in the space but welcomed. Therefore, the use of first-person narrative worked to convey the intimacy between the writer and interviewee as well as the reader and the interviewee. By setting the scene and using first-person, the reader is asked to identify with the writer through the use of "I" and join them in bearing witness to the interviewee's life history. These conventions relied on the spatial and affective intimacy of the home, similar to how anthropological discourse dominant at the time signaled a sense of *being there* and *occupying space* with the community being studied as a source of authority and authenticity. *[[194]](#footnote-194)* Therefore, by setting the scene, the writer often made the reader feel like they were now in the room with the interviewee. Together, the writer and reader could listen to the interviewee recount their life history.

**Description, Not Opinion**

Because the writer was setting the scene to introduce the person recounting their life history, editors and writers also negotiated how present the writer should be in this initial prose. Writers and editors struggled over which authorial voice and perspective to privilege in the life histories. Therefore, a key part of editing the life histories was finding a balance between setting the scene and making sure the writer’s presence did not dominate the scene by introducing the writer’s feelings and judgments.

Since the writer was supposed to be positioned as an observer simply documenting the interviewee's life, their attitudes and beliefs were not supposed to emerge. A strategy became a focus on description. The lists of features, reproduced in the topic models and document clusters, reveal the approach. Topic 6 serves as a particularly good example of this language, with all of its strongest associated words focusing on common areas and objects within a house: “kitchen," "yard," "living [room]," and “porch." The words indicate a focus on describing items at the location of the interview.

Moore makes precisely this move in Rumbley’s life history, noting,

Above her mantel there hangs a framed family record. It is a picture containing garlands of roses, an open hook, and two centrally placed ovals bearing the words Father, Mother… The room in which we sat had not been difficult to straighten. It contained an iron bed, an old Singer sewing machine, a small walnut table and the two rocking chairs before the fire. Sweeping must have been the most difficult job she had to perform because the floor was old and splintery. Many bright colored pictures, most of them calendars, were nailed to the dingy gray walls.

Many others followed suit, such as writer Ina Hawkes, who described approaching Fannie Busbin’s farm in Georgia: “A little farther around the house I saw a large supper song vine covering the arbor and loaded with supper songs. There were many trees in the yards and the pear and pecan trees were full of fruit, but the apple and peach tree, had just about stopped bearing fruit for the season, I picked a handful of scupper-nongs and continued on around the house.”[[195]](#footnote-195) Setting the scene situated the writer as a keen observer and therefore able to indexically document what they saw and heard.

Another feature of the writing that editors homed in on was words that they deemed too judgmental or opinionated. An aim was for the reader to draw their own conclusions from the interviews; reducing language that suggested an opinion or judgment, often in the form of adjectives, was a priority. The use of words such as "disreputable" or "forlorn” was frowned upon, for they were seen as introducing opinions and judgments that disrupted the writer's position as an intimate but nonetheless objective observer and got in the way of the interviewee’s ability to tell their story on their terms. Couch's ongoing frustrations with the Alabama FWP's life histories and their leadership led to direct and explicit instructions about using opinions. Couch wrote a letter to Alabama State Director Myrtle Miles offering feedback on the life histories sent to him in Chapel Hill. Irritated by the inclusion of opinions through the expression of the writer's feelings, he wrote,

The terms ‘disreputable’ and ‘forlorn’ are emotive terms expressing feeling, and as used in this sentence they express the feeling of the author. Now it happens that one of the first principles of this work is that the author is to keep his feelings out of the stories. His task is to try to get the people on paper as they see themselves; to them to their own story in their own words as much as possible, and to suppress his own feelings and attitudes.[[196]](#footnote-196)

The writer, according to Couch, was to leave their feelings and, therefore opinions, out of the story. The writer was a vehicle, like a camera, for documenting another person’s life history by which the reader could then draw conclusions. To drive the point home, he continued:

This kind of statement should not be made. The author should give his description and let the reader draw his conclusions as to whether the place described is a slum or not. In the next sentence I have to object to the ‘rude’ shack ‘crouched low’. These terms are terribly hackneyed. The author will find that if he will talk to the people living in such a community, they will give him out of their own mouths description fresh, interesting, vivid, and far more to the point than anything he can get by ‘crouching’ and ‘sprawling’.[[197]](#footnote-197)

Looking at the text analysis also reveals the emphasis on reducing the writer's opinions when setting the scene. The clustering of primarily nouns and verbs in the theme visualizer further indicates how adjectives were less prevalent. Consider, for example, Topic 14, which focuses on teaching and education. The most prominent words in the topic include nouns describing the people and places involved in the education domain: “teacher”, “college”, “service”, “book”, and “service”. The other most strongly associated words with the topic include active verbs such as “teach”, “become”, “study”, and “attend”. None of the top 20 words associated with the topic are adjectives or adverbs. Similarly, Topic 10 centers on farming. It is most associated with nouns such as “acre”, “crop”, “tobacco”, “mule”, and “horse”; as with the education topic, affective adjectives and adverbs describing farm-life are not prominent in the topic. Similar patterns appear across the other topics identified by both topic models.

Editors also sought to reduce literary flourishes that they understood as challenging the observational stance of the writer. Citing Jack Kytle’s life history of Bob Curtis, Couch wrote, “The general introduction on page 1 gives information that is needed, and it conveys this information very well, but for our purpose such passages as this would be better if the information were given without the use of figures of speech. We wish to avoid the appearance of attempting to be literary.”[[198]](#footnote-198) Using literary techniques risked centering the writer's voice and authority by establishing their writing style in the document. By instead focusing on lists of features on the exterior and material culture on the interior, the life histories drew focus on the interviewee. Writers could then convey “authentic” messages about class and lifestyle, from which the reader could draw a picture in their mind of the person's living conditions and thereby develop their own judgments.

Along with attention to language, overuse of language also risked undermining the writer's position as simply an observer reporting the facts who enabled the interviewee to speak for themselves. Often editors cut down the opening section. Editors constantly charged writers with "overwriting." They worried that the writers were either too focused on themselves, and thereby shifting the authorial voice, or where writers were demonstrating knowledge about the interviewees’ thoughts and feels. For example, as mentioned earlier an editorial report on life histories from a North Carolina Mill Village stated, “While these sketches are remarkably good for field reports, a few show a tendency towards overwriting. The most effective stories are those simply told.”[[199]](#footnote-199) The report went on to add that “the other sketches, where the research worker is neither described nor introduced, are better.”[[200]](#footnote-200) As a constant theme with most of the strategies used by the SLHP writers, the writing should focus on creating word pictures to convey a message of authenticity to readers of the interview.

While the form of the life histories tried to assert claims of neutral observation, racialized logics still permeated. Writers' and editors' editorial decisions were not evenly applied. One area where racialized decision-making becomes pronounced is the set of interviews with people working in agriculture or related service sectors, particularly how they used adjectives when setting the scene and describing the home. Document clusters 5-8 contain life histories related to agricultural work.[[201]](#footnote-201) The interviews in clusters 5, 6, and 7 are predominantly from White interviewees, with no more than 19% of the interviews taken from Black interviewees. The most strongly associated words for these clusters are concrete nouns describing household objects, such as “bedroom”, “kitchen”, “yard”, “stove”, and “porch”.

In contrast, Document Cluster 8 consists of a nearly even split between White and Black interviewees (48% vs. 52%). The most strongly associated words in this include words such as “dirty” and “dingy”. The use of disparaging adjectives used to describe White and Black homes' interior extends to the exterior, but primarily with Black interviewees. Writers regularly set the stage by describing the homes as "dilapidated"[[202]](#footnote-202) and “rickety” steps or pillars[[203]](#footnote-203), immediately situating the interviewee as residing in poverty. The descriptions framed the interviewee as unable to maintain and take care of their home, which risked playing into problematic racialized stereotypes. As a result, editorial decisions when setting the scene were applied through racialized and classed gazes.

**Shifting Authorial Voice through Block Quotes**

Following the setting of the scene, the reader joins the writer to listen to the life history. To suggest that the words are exactly those of the interviewee, they are in the form of a series of block quotes. Often, the block quotes are uninterrupted. Because the writer does not disrupt the interviewee, the story seemingly flows from the interviewee as a whole, from start to finish. As a result, the reader feels like they are listening to an unmediated and complete life history.

Using first-person narratives in the life histories furthered claims to documenting an authentic story. While Edwin Bjorkman wrote to George Andrews (admin), Mary Northrop, Sidney Jones, Harriet Corley, and W.O. Saunders that accurately documenting the life history did "not mean that the stories necessarily must be told in the first person," it was often the case.[[204]](#footnote-204) By suggesting that the document exactly recounts the interviewee's words in first person block quotes, the life histories drew on the power of autobiography and biography.[[205]](#footnote-205) The writer figuratively (and physically) sets the scene like a biographer to introduce the main character, the interviewee. The person inhabiting the first-person point of view then switches to the interviewee as they recount their life story in an autobiography style. This narrative strategy seeks to eliminate the possibility that the reader is reading anything but the person’s narration of their own story in their own words through quote after quote after quote.

While block quotes denote authenticity, the reality behind how the quotes were obtained is quite murky given that writers did not have recording equipment, instead relying on their notes and memory. This situation created such difficulty that many writers balked at the long block quotes when reading Rumbley’s story as the example they were supposed to follow. For example, after reading the life history aloud to his writers, Chalmers Murray, a district supervisor in South Carolina, explained that

Several of the workers objected to the long dialogue-or rather the long monologue - saying that it would have been utterly impossible for the author to remember page after page of conversation. I told them that they were not to take too literally the directions about giving a verbatim account of the interview. This cannot be done unless one took stenographic notes or used a dictaphone. If the person interviewed does not speak out of character in the story or is not grossly misquoted, there is little to worry about, in my opinion. Probably nothing in the way of an interview would ever be published if verbatim recording were required.[[206]](#footnote-206)

Therefore, block quotes became a strategy to convince the reader that the writer indexically documented the interviewee's exact words and that the interviewee was literally speaking for themselves, despite the liberties that were taken in creating such quotations. The extensive use of block quotes presented editors and writers with another challenge concerning exactly how to represent the voice of interviewees.

**Dialect as Authenticity**

Writers used dialect to bolster claims that the life history was the *actual* voice of the interviewee. Dialect is a common narrative device to situate a person within a particular geography or positionality, such as a social class, ethnicity, race, and gender. Using dialect to represent how a person spoke was designed to persuade the reader that the story was accurately recorded, a powerful technique when combined with block quotes.[[207]](#footnote-207)

With the use of written dialect, the SLHP entered a complicated realm. On the one hand, writing all the interviews in “standard English” could make them easier to read for one of their major audiences, the White middle- and upper-class readers who supported the literary market. On the other hand, claims to authenticity and accuracy could be bolstered, administrators argued, if the life histories read like how people spoke. At a minimum, leaders like Alsberg thought dialect would make the stories a bit more dynamic and therefore engage potential readers. He wrote, “They might be useful for our racial group and folklore work in other parts of the country. I think a little more of the flavor of the local dialect will make the stories more readable, and that there should be considerably more contrast, light and dark, in the telling.”[[208]](#footnote-208)

Dialect is a prominent feature in life histories. For example, Topic 13 and Topic 16 aggregate around two different geographies. Topic 13 includes interviews by a plethora of writers in Alabama and South Carolina. Topic 16 focuses on interviews conducted by Robert McKinney in New Orleans.[[209]](#footnote-209) For each of these topics, the most prominent words are all forms of dialect. For example, “git”, “jest”, “reckon”, “hit”, “wuz”, “git”, “wid”, and “fer” being amongst the most dominant terms.

Assigned to the New Orleans office, McKinney was among, if not the first, Black writer hired as a part of FWP in Louisiana but was not a member of the black unit.[[210]](#footnote-210) The graduate of Xavier University joined an integrated unit with Hazel Breaux, Caroline Durieux, and others.[[211]](#footnote-211) His access to Black communities in New Orleans was seen as an asset by state director Lyle Saxon.[[212]](#footnote-212) The efforts to capture slight distinctions in ways of speaking are indicated by the slight differences in the use of dialect. For example, McKinney works to capture the dropping of "g" in the back of verbs such as "morning” and “living” and “a” in “again”. The careful attention to certain kinds of linguistic features suggests the use of dialect by a local writer attuned to and documenting the nuances of local speech. To a reader from the community, the nuances of dialect could further signal, particularly to a reader from the same community, that the voice, and therefore story they are reading, is accurate. However, the challenge with using dialect was that the intended audience was not the person interviewed nor often even a member of the community from which the interviewee resided but primarily White middle class reading publics, academics, and bureaucrats.

The text analysis brings the racialized use of dialect in stark contrast. The challenge, then, is that written dialect can undermine people's voices because of how written English functions socially and culturally. "Standard" English is unquestioned and seen as normal, whereas dialect, signaled through the spelling of words, is often linked to a series of assumptions about difference, which are often shaped by race and class. Effort to respell a word to reflect how a person pronounced a word is often interpreted as a misspelling in text and therefore associated with being uneducated, or, at minimum, difference from the norm.[[213]](#footnote-213)

An even stronger dialect signal can be found in the document clustering model that does not remove dialect terms. The last eight clusters, 25-32, are all dominated by the usage of dialect. Looking at the proportion of Black interviewees in these clusters shows that the dialect was used to indicate race and class. Clusters 28-32 all consist of at least 57% of Black interviews, while they only made up about one-quarter of the life histories collected. Interestingly, the use of dialect does not show strong clustering by specific location or writer. The example of McKinney's work clustering further demonstrates how attention to local speech patterns was obfuscated in favor of a more general, standardized "southern" dialect, most commonly applied to Black interviewees' voice. Given the racist ideologies bolstered by a culture of segregation that situated Black citizens as less than their White counterparts, dialect could also function as a strategy that furthered racist and white supremacist ideologies.

In the life histories, dialect was not applied evenly. Dialect is so prominent in the life histories of Black interviewees that, if not removed, almost all of the Black interviews will be group together based on dialect. The fact that the dialect words cluster and become the most significant “topics” of Black interviewees illuminates how these text analysis methods can limit our analysis at best and replicate racialized and racist ways of knowing at worst. Primarily defining and exploring Black interviews by dialect risks recreating the same process as the SLHP in a computational and digital form. While the topic offers insight into the interviews and racialized formal strategies, one risk is only computational reading with the grain and not against it. Because writers used dialect to mark race, a risk is that topic modeling and document clustering reinscribes the racialized logic of SLHP. A risk is reproducing a form of computational color blindness, a problematic racist ideology in and of itself. As a result, the models were adjusted (see Methods) to reveal subjects in the interviews beyond just dialect. To explore, see the topic models and document clusters where dialect is removed.

**Obscuring the Role of the Writer**

Like the introduction, where the writer set the scene, editors were concerned about the writer's presence throughout the rest of the story as the interviewee recounted their life history through mainly block quotes. As Tennessee State Director William H. McDaniel wrote to Couch, “You will notice that we are not writing the life histories in any prescribed form. Usually, the type of story dictates the best manner in which to tell it. We have told this in the first person, though the third person has been used in most of the others. We are keeping the interviewer out of them all as much as possible since his presence in most cases has no constructive significance.”[[214]](#footnote-214)

Disrupting the voice of the interviewee was deeply frowned upon. Constantly frustrated by the life histories coming from Alabama, Couch did not temper his criticism. Getting specific, he wrote,

In this paragraph how does the author know that Nora is embarrassed by being in the same classes with children…how does he know Beatrice has ‘accepted her father’s philosophy of life. She is interested only in finding a man,’ etc. The author should be extremely careful how he makes statements like these. If Nora and Beatrice said things which made him come to these conclusions, he should repeat in his story what Nora and Beatrice said and let the reader draw conclusions. If he drew his conclusions from statements made by Bob or Christine, he should quote them.[[215]](#footnote-215)

In other words, the writer should make sure to position such judgments as emanating from the interviewee by including them in the block quotes. They should not be in the words of the writer.

Editorial notes across the life histories indicate a significant amount of time was spent removing the writer and putting the interviewee in the forefront. The way that the life histories were written—specifically the use of block quotes and dialect—were intended to suggest that the reader was listening to the interviewee's story in their exact words. They were simply telling their story with the writer as a scribe. As a result, one could read the topics they focus on or address as an indicator of the features of social life that the interviewees found important. For example, the topic models and document clusters focus on areas such as education, employment, foodways, and the law. However, another way to read these themes is as an indicator of the intentionality of the decisions made for the subjects of the life histories. Several themes map onto the questions and themes that writers were told to explore in the instructions.

Yet, the life history form obscured the role of questionnaires and conversation in shaping the interviewee's story as the writer omitted the specific questions that they asked the interviewee. For example, certain writers used questionnaires modeled from the instructions that explicitly asked about areas such as food and education. In contrast, certain writers pursued their own themes, such as Rose Shepard, who asked questions that allowed White interviewees in Jacksonville to obscure the horrors of chattel slavery through lost cause romanticism and celebrate settler colonialism. Many of these interviews are contained in Document Cluster 14 (with dialect) or Document Cluster 32 (without dialect). Rather than represent that back and forth through dialogue or why, the writers used block quotes that obfuscated the role such prompts had in shaping the story. The aim was to reify their claims that the story was original to the interviewee and not biased or shaped by the writer. By not indicating the role of conversation and questions in shaping the interviewee's story through block quotes, the form obscured the writer and FWP's authorial influence at large.

All of these strategies were in the service of producing a life history that created a word picture focused on the interviewee. Through setting the scene, the reader entered space with the interviewee. Through block quotes, the reader heard directly, and ideally without interruption, from the interviewee. Dialect made the sounds of the physical interview come to life through the written word. How to end the life history became the final challenge.

**Closing a Life History**

How to close a life history was quickly solidified, as revealed by the unit's most prolific writers. Some writers, particularly Bernice Harris, ended the life history with the words of the interviewee.[[216]](#footnote-216) While occasionally there was a short description to close the scene followed by a quote from the interviewee, the more common approach was to use block quotes until the end. The authorial voice remained with the interviewee, who literally had the last word.

When writers shifted their authorial voice back to themselves by returning to their presence in the scene, editors worked to minimize and remove their presence. This often came in the form of a few sentences where the writer described leaving the location. Like a play, they were exiting the scene. The approach recentered the writer and disrupted the interviewee's voice, and therefore risked undermining the work of the life history. If the pages of block quotes were meant to lull the reader into a sense that they were next to the interviewer reading the exact words, and therefore an unadulterated story of the person's life, then a reminder of the presence of the writer risked reminding the reader that a layer of interpretation sat between them and the interviewee. A return to the writer also risked recentering them at the main character, thereby hatching doubts about who the story was really about: was the life history a story about a writer meeting and interviewing a person or a document of the interviewee’s story? The SLHP editors made it clear that the goal was the latter.

To assert the claim that the reader was listening to the person in their own words, revisers edited the interviews to let the interviewee have the last word. For example, the edits of Gertha Couric's interview "A Day on the Farm" were mostly minor except for the final marks. The editor marked out the final paragraph that brought the interview back to Couric. She had written, "Soon after this Gorman came for me, thus ending a day with the two little ladies, who for fifty years, have held down a ‘man-sized’ job without complaint."[[217]](#footnote-217) The edits appear to actually be Couch himself, who with the same penmanship wrote, "Excellent WC." Even if not Couch, the document demonstrates his approval of the interview as exemplary, which a review of notes on other life histories and his comments in his papers reveals was uncommon. However, the ending that returned to Couric needed to be cut.

Another example further highlights the importance of the interviewee’s voice as the last one the reader heard. In an interview called “Life in a Shrimping and Oyster Shucking Camp," the writer Ila B. Prine ends with a three-paragraph description of the camp. The last line then reads, “Amid such surroundings, these people were very cheerful, and were delighted to have visitors.”[[218]](#footnote-218) Couch was anything but delighted and commented in the document that this approach was a "Bad ending."[[219]](#footnote-219) As both examples demonstrate, SLHP editors and writers agreed that the interview should end with the authorial voice of the interviewee.

*These Are Our Lives*, the only book published of the life histories during the era, further asserts the final form of the life history as ending with the interviewee's voice. With a few exceptions, life histories quickly moved into block quotes indicating the authorial shift to the interviewee and did not switch back to the writer. They end in the room with the interviewee to convey their authenticity through the intimacy of not only being in the room with the interviewee but hearing their voice last. The first and only book published of life histories offers insight into the form the SLHP settled on and the reader's understanding of the success of centering the interviewee's story.

**An Argument Published: *These Are Our Lives***

Throughout 1938 and 1939, the SLHP formalized the form of a life history. In a few paragraphs, the writer sets the scene. With the writer in the interviewee's physical presence, the writer turned the authorial voice over the interviewee, who told their story. The shift in authorial voice was indicated by the use of first-person and block quotes. In one block quote after another, the interviewee often began with the beginning of their life and moved to the present, uninterrupted. The reader was positioned as having joined the writer to bear witness to the exact words, literally quoted, from the interviewee. The life history then ended with the interviewee getting the last word. The form was designed to make sure the life histories came from the viewpoint of the person telling their story, an important shift in perspective that allowed individuals to speak and be heard.

Each document was a single person’s life history, but they weren’t designed to read in isolation. Couch argued that building, selecting, and organizing life histories into a collection was a critical way that the life histories produced knowledge. “Until after a large amount of material has been collected and studied, it is not possible to know what is most important, most typical, or how stories should be classified and published in order to give the most faithful representation,” wrote Couch.[[220]](#footnote-220) The technology of the book, therefore, became a strategy for how life histories created knowledge.

How the life histories were organized and therefore read became another defining feature. The life histories were intended to be read in aggregate. The insights they revealed were designed to be produced through repetition, by reading one story after another to paint a "word picture" through "human documents” of society. As Couch wrote in the Preface to *These Are Our Lives* (TAOL), “The idea is to get life histories which are readable and faithful representations of living persons, and which, taken together, will give a fair picture of the structure and working of society.”[[221]](#footnote-221)

As a result, the SLHP directly entered debates about sociological knowledge. The book's form was also an implicit critique of prominent Sociologists, who believed that quantitative data was at the heart of producing a fair picture of society. As a part of their efforts to fortify their claims to a science, prominent sociologists amplified calls to prioritize quantitative analysis. For example, the case method advocates argued that the qualitative data that comprised a case study, such as life histories, should be turned into quantitative data. Quantitative methods could then be used to identify and classify patterns in social behavior that could identify social types and social laws. [[222]](#footnote-222) These methods were seen as more objective and less biased. Much of this work was driven by sociologists invested in social work, particularly the study of deviance that led to the field of criminology. TAOL joined growing critiques that quantitative data was the way to glean insights about social conditions. Rather, the process of reading individual stories in aggregate - one after another - allowed the reader also to identify patterns. Qualitative data in the form of life histories, in other words, could shed light on social structures and society. Accordingly, the SLHP planned a series of books on topics such as mill village life and oil workers, though TAOL was the only book published.

While reviewers were not always as enamored by the book, they were generally convinced of the method. They were persuaded by the form’s claims to being the authentic, accurate voice of the people interviewed. As a reviewer in 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.”[[223]](#footnote-223) The United Kingdom-based *Sunday Mirror* Magazine Section wrote:

Today, Americans are meeting Americans as never before in the history of the country. These United States have had their internal troubles, their bitter sectional differences—but today the farmer knows his security depends on the well-being of industrial centers; the mill worker knows that his food supply depends on the success of the planter.

One way that Americans have been able to learn who their neighbors are, how they get along, is by the factual reporting of the life histories of living, average Americans.

One of the outstanding examples of such reporting is the recent publication of the Federal Writers’ Project book, “These Are Our Lives,” presenting the stories of Southern Americans in their own words, written from the standpoint of the individuals themselves.[[224]](#footnote-224)

As the *Sunday Mirror’s* review of TAOL demonstrates, the conventions ultimately used to shape the life histories position the content as the interviewee's true words. The form, in aggregate, could then shed light on social truths about society. "The method of writing life histories from the viewpoint of the person concerned in a new device," wrote Couch. “It will depend for its final justification on whether the mass of readers is enabled to gain such insight into the lives of other people as will lead to fresh appreciation and understanding. If this purpose is realized, the validity of the method is vindicated."[[225]](#footnote-225) The SLHP may not have been often validated by their sociology colleagues in Chapel Hill or Chicago, but their primary audience read with appreciation and understanding.

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.”[[226]](#footnote-226) 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.[[227]](#footnote-227)

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.[[228]](#footnote-228) 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.”[[229]](#footnote-229) 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 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.[[230]](#footnote-230) 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.[[231]](#footnote-231) 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.[[232]](#footnote-232)

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.”[[233]](#footnote-233) 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.”[[234]](#footnote-234) 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.”[[235]](#footnote-235)

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.[[236]](#footnote-236) 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.”[[237]](#footnote-237) 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.[[238]](#footnote-238) 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.”[[239]](#footnote-239) 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.”[[240]](#footnote-240) 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.[[241]](#footnote-241) 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 about the opportunities and limits of quantification and the nature of data continue, 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.

Method

This layer provides a description of the methods used to collect the data for the project, the models used to perform text analysis of the life histories, and the underlying technologies used to create the digital project. All of the code and data are available for download under permissive open-source licenses. Links are provided within the text.

**Data Collection**

The collection of life histories used in this project are held by The Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the Southern Historical Collection.[[242]](#footnote-242) The texts of the life histories have been digitized and made available for public access through the library’s web interface. Life histories are provided as PDF images; there are no searchable, machine-readable versions of the texts available on the website.[[243]](#footnote-243) Each life history has a short caption that includes information about the title of the interview, its location, date, and interviewee's name. This information is not structured into specific fields. Additional metadata information about the life histories are included in the digitized images in the form of headers at the top of each interview and as summary cards included in the archive. We structured the headers into a database for this project and created plain text machine-readable versions of each life history for data analysis.

Creating metadata records of the interviews required manually parsing the unstructured text and reading the individual metadata headers for each interview. The process of manual parsing was conducted by the authors, students in a class taught by Rivard, and a paid research assistant. An article focused on the pedagogical practices and lessons learned from this process appeared in *Digital Humanities Quarterly*.[[244]](#footnote-244) The article discusses various ways of crediting contributors—particularly how to credit those students who made substantive contributions beyond that of the typical class requirements—through authorship credit and other visualizations.

After being converted into structure records, the metadata was organized into a collection of normalized tables.[[245]](#footnote-245) These tables contain information about writers, revisers, interviewees, interviews, and professions. The collection of tables follows the “tidy data” model, with a different table dedicated to each type of record.[[246]](#footnote-246) Normalized relational tables are particularly important in our dataset because many of the relationships linking tables to one another are complex one-to-many and many-to-many relationships. For example, most writers wrote more than one interview, and some interviews were co-written by two or more writers. The normalized data model guarantees that data about each entry is consistent and easy to update.

While most of the variables in the metadata tables are relatively straightforward to record and describe, a few fields require some discussion. Some interviews used pseudonyms for the interviewee names. In many cases, the pseudonyms and real names are mapped to one another in the header of the typed interview; the digital archive hosted by The Wilson Library lists interviews by real names, not pseudonyms. For these two reasons, we have listed both forms of names when given in our dataset and use real names when displaying records on the digital site. This makes our data consistent with the archival source and does not reveal private data that is not available elsewhere.

Recording race and gender information about writers and interviewees also require careful decision-making. As digital humanities scholars such as Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein have argued, "what gets counted counts," yet must be done with careful attention to binaries, hierarchies, and classifications.[[247]](#footnote-247) Because we were interested in understanding the racial logic that the SLHP produced, we used the categories in the archival records. The SLHP subscribed to a gender binary of “male” or “female”, which they often typed in the header of the life history.

The gender of the interviewees and writers were inconsistently documented though. Since we were interested in the gender representation among the interviewees and writers, we assigned a gender based on the binary logic of the SLHP. Given how writers and editors wrote and edited the stories, the gender can usually be inferred based on pronouns and other gendered language (i.e., “wife”) used in relation to an interviewee. The gender of the writers was determined by archival records through a close reading of correspondences for an individual's pronouns. Given the number of writers who are silent in the archive except for the life history they wrote, we also turned to census data that used the gender binary.

Along with gender, we were interested in how race was configured at the time. We took as our guide cautions about encoding racial logic through data that digital humanities scholars such as Jessica Marie Johnson and DH initiatives such as #transformdh and #dhpoco have elucidated.[[248]](#footnote-248) As constructed and unstable categories, racial categorization was a significant site of contention in the 1930s as groups debated the names and boundaries of race and ethnicity. For interviewees, we used the categories described in the interview metadata. The SLHP, we learned through the process of creating this data, used three primary categories: Negro, White, and Other. Because of the implications of the term “negro” in the past and today, we used “Black” as the category that appears on the site. In an effort to account for the complicated relationship between race and ethnicity, they at times included categories such as Greek or Swedish. These categories should be used carefully, however, because some labels are inconsistently applied. For example, interviews of Greek families sometimes describe the interviewees as "White" and other times as "Greek." We included an additional field to capture more granular ethnic categories that can be inferred from the text.[[249]](#footnote-249) Racial information for the writers was determined by archival records. Records for which we were unable to determine a racial category are labeled as “unclear”.

Our dataset includes a record for every interview that is listed in the archive’s finding aid. The digital files are organized into folders, which most frequently contain a single interview, but occasionally include over a dozen individual interviews. Some interviews are duplicates or near-duplicates of each other, and others consist of a single sentence indicating that the record has been deleted. For consistency and simplicity, our data splits out each individual interview and includes duplicate records. Removal of duplicates and other processing is done during the analysis of the data, making explicit how modeling decisions relate to the data contained in the archive.

Along with the metadata, we also produced machine-readable versions of the text of each interview. Off-the-shelf optical character recognition (OCR) made a reasonable first pass of some of the interviews but produced unusable text in others. An external paid service was used to manually clean up the OCR into usable text. Some typed records contain either typed or handwritten corrections made by the revisers and editors in the Southern Life History Project; these include fixing typos, rephrasing sentence structure, editorial comments about the content and quality of writing, and making substantive edits to the content of the interview. For consistency, and because the crossed-out text was often unreadable, the machine-readable files used only the corrected versions of the text without any handwritten editorial comments. In a limited number of cases, due to physical imperfections, fading, or issues with the digitization process, small portions of the texts were unreadable. These are marked with the phrase "[text not clear]." The final machine-readable text files include all of the header information contained in the typed pages but exclude page numbers and any written comments that are not corrections to the main text.

The metadata and machine-readable versions of the life histories are published under the open-source GNU Public License (GPL-2).[[250]](#footnote-250) These can be downloaded in bulk. All of the data are contained in plain text forms that can be read by most data analysis software. Metadata is provided as CSV files, and the texts are provided as text files (one file per interview). All of the material is encoded using UTF-8 and internal consistency of the records was checked with a set of unit tests.[[251]](#footnote-251) The points on the interactive map and embedded figures in this project were all created using this metadata.

**Text Analysis**

Layer 4, alongside other archival evidence, presents several computational models to help understand and organize the 1248 life histories in the collection. For these analyses, duplicated interviews and interviews whose text was removed from the archive were not included in the analysis. When two slightly different versions of an interview appeared in the collection, we selected the longest text. After filtering, the collection contained 1106 life histories. Finally, these were cleaned to remove headers and instances of “[text not clear]” within the machine-readable text.[[252]](#footnote-252)

The two text analysis models used in our analysis—topic modeling and document clustering—are both built to analyze term frequencies (TFs). TFs count how frequently particular words or wordforms occur within each document within a corpus. To compute these counts, we passed the text of each life history through a language processing (NLP) pipeline using the R package cleanNLP. [[253]](#footnote-253) The package applies pre-built models to split the text into individual words and punctuation marks (tokenization), construct standardized forms of the words (lemmatization), and tagged each word with a part of speech code. [[254]](#footnote-254) Using this information, we constructed counts of lemmas for all lemmas tagged as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. [[255]](#footnote-255) Because of the heavy influence of place names in the lexicon of the texts, we also explicitly removed any place names (i.e., cities and census-designated places) contained in any of the geographic columns in the metadata.[[256]](#footnote-256)

The life histories use a significant amount of “eye dialect” in which words are intentionally misspelled to signal what is problematically called “non-standard” pronunciations. Examples include “git” for “get” and “wuz” for “was”.[[257]](#footnote-257) The use of dialect is an interesting and important feature that we investigate in Layer 4. It offers insight into how spelling was used as a racial signifier and inculcated in white supremacist ideologies. At the same time, it dominates the signal within the topic models and document clusters, making it hard to detect other linguistic features. We have made available versions of our models with dialect included and with dialect removed for these reasons. To identify and remove dialect, we started by comparing each of the words identified by the NLP pipeline with a “standard” spelling dictionary of American English and removed words that were not included.[[258]](#footnote-258) Then, we looked at the most over-represented words in interviews of Black interviews and manually constructed a list of additional dialect terms to remove. These consisted of relatively uncommon terms that are English words but have alternative meanings. For example, the word "den" was used heavily in the corpus as dialect for the word "then." Using this approach as a strategy to explore other linguistic features, the approach is intended to offer another way to explore the topics that does not reduce the stories of people of color to primarily racist applications of dialect.

Using the term frequencies, we computed two sets of topic models, one with dialect terms and one without them. We used latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) as implemented by the R package topicmodels to construct the models.[[259]](#footnote-259) LDA is a common and well-known technique in digital humanities and digital history research that calculates a probability for word co-occurrence.[[260]](#footnote-260) After some experimentation, we included 16 topics to display. The visualization of these topics on the digital project includes the probability distributions over words and the probability distributions of documents that each model defines.

Finally, document clustering was also applied to each of the two sets of term frequencies. Document clustering is the process of grouping all of the items in a corpus of texts into discrete groups, called clusters, based on linguistic features. Clustering is not commonly used in DH projects, primarily because of the momentum around the use of topic models. For many projects, including ours, it is useful to find groups of documents that use similar language features. It is possible to find some groups of documents by looking at the results of a topic model, but this approach will miss documents that cross between multiple topics. Also, the results of LDA are quite sensitive to a number of parameters, most notably the number of topics used. Document clustering can avoid these issues and move directly to the task of grouping together similar documents.

We used spectral clustering to produce clusters of documents. Spectral clustering is a relatively well-known technique in statistical computing for grouping together textual documents.[[261]](#footnote-261) We used the implementation from the R package casl to apply this algorithm.[[262]](#footnote-262) Document clustering is a hierarchical clustering method. The algorithm starts by splitting all of the documents in a corpus into two groups such that the two groups differ as much as possible in their usage of words. Then, the same algorithm is applied to each of these groups separately to split the entire collection into four subgroups. Applying again yields eight subgroups, then sixteen, and so forth. We applied this algorithm five times to yield a set of 32 clusters. Due to the iterative method, the clusters are related to one another. Documents in cluster 1 and cluster 2, for example, were split only in the final round of the algorithm.

All of the code to produce the text analysis models are made available under the open-source GNU Public License (GPL-2).[[263]](#footnote-263) The code works directly off of the data described in the previous section. It also includes the code to create the JSON files that serve as the backend for the digital project.

**Digital Platform**

The project is a part of a growing community of scholars, publishers, and foundations working together to expand the forms of academic scholarship. This includes expanding what counts as evidence, ways of knowing, and communicating knowledge. Along with archival evidence, the creation, analysis, and communication of data sits at the core of this project. The digital platform offered an opportunity to make visible *what* kindsof data we created, *how* we analyzed the data, and *why* through visualizations and text. It also provided a space to communicate scholarship through visual ways of knowing – graphs, maps, and interactive visualizations. Additionally, the interactive visualizations encourage visitors to explore the archive alongside us, build off our scholarship, and pose their questions. As Cox and Tilton have written, developing open access and interactive digital public projects can expand our argumentative strategies and reorient the reader/viewer as not just a person to be persuaded but as a participant engaged in humanistic inquiry and communication.[[264]](#footnote-264)

The platform is designed to pair text and interactive visualizations to convey the project’s arguments and scope. The project is structured in layers. Like a chapter, each layer offers insights into the social, political, and cultural work of the SLHP. In the same way that audiences have learned how to read a text to interpret an argument, audiences also have tools to interpret visualizations; there is a system of symbols and signifiers that people have learned to "read" visualizations that they employ daily. This project uses visualizations such as interactive mapping as a form of argumentation and then puts them in conversation with textual argumentation. As a result, this project is not strictly a textual book on a digital platform as we harness layers and the interpretive power of interactive visualizations to convey a set of arguments through an interactive platform made possible by the affordances of digital technologies.

The structure of the project builds off the spatial and visual turn in DH. As scholars such as Tara McPherson, Jentery Sayers, and Lev Manovich have argued, DH remains a text-heavy field.[[265]](#footnote-265) The call to use the affordances of computational methods to use visual ways of knowing, such as graphs and interactive visualizations, is amplifying. Led by scholars such as Stanford’s Richard White and over two decades of critical cartography, scholars have also used visualizations such as maps to convey scholarly knowledge and arguments. The project brings together these turns through the digital platform.

The digital platform is written using a number of open-source technologies. The main functional elements of the site are written using the popular JavaScript framework ReactJS. Additional JavaScript packages were used within ReactJS to add specific functionality, such as the use of router to create meaningful URLs and React-Dropdown to create interactive menus. Modern web standards are used to provide responsive, cross-platform compatible code using documented CSS3 and HTML5. The source code is available on GitHub.[[266]](#footnote-266) Any original code produced for the project is under a GPL-2 license; some derivative components are released under an alternative open-source license as required by their respective authors.

The mapping component of the website uses the JavaScript library Leaflet within ReactJS. Each of the maps was manually georeferenced using QGIS and projected into the Albers conic projection.[[267]](#footnote-267) This projection preserves areas and more accurately represents distances between points when compared to a Mercator projection.[[268]](#footnote-268) Map tiles were created using the Geospatial Data Abstraction Library (GDAL).[[269]](#footnote-269) The map tiles are served locally by the project; this is slightly less efficient than a purpose-built GIS server but is more stable and reliable for long-term preservation and access to the digital project.

The visualization of the topic models is written as a custom JavaScript code. It was adapted from a similar visualization produced for the Signs@40 project, made available under an open-source license.[[270]](#footnote-270) All of the data for the visualizations are stored as JSON files to simplify deployment and increase the stability of our application. This design choice removes the need for a backend database, making it relatively easy to run the website from alternative sources. Keeping the backend of the website minimal also facilitates long-term access to the project by minimizing the ways that the site could become obsolete. Code to create the topic model files are included in the repository containing the code for producing the topic models.

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45. Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (UNC Press Books, 1982), 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Singal, 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Orvin Lee Shiflett, *William Terry Couch and the Politics of Academic Publishing: An Editor’s Career as Lightning Rod for Controversy* (McFarland, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Singal, *The War Within*, 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. “History of the Odum Institute,” The Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, accessed September 23, 2019, https://odum.unc.edu/about/history/. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Singal, *The War Within*, 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Arthur F. Raper, “Mass Violence in America: The Tragedy of Lynching,” 1933. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Rayford W. Logan, review of *Review of The Tragedy of Lynching*, by Arthur Raper, *The Journal of Negro History* 18, no. 4 (1933): 484–86, https://doi.org/10.2307/2714309. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Singal, *The War Within*, 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Shiflett, *William Terry Couch and the Politics of Academic Publishing: An Editor’s Career as Lightning Rod for Controversy*; Singal, *The War Within*. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. 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-55)
56. Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (Verso, 1994); Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*; Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (OUP USA, 2010); Sonnet H. Retman, *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression* (Duke University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. 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-57)
58. There is a significant amount of research on the New Deal State, work includes: Brent Cebul, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams, eds., *Shaped by the State: Toward a New Political History of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton University Press, 1989); Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941.*, reprint (Times Books, 1993), https://www.amazon.com/Great-Depression-America-1929-1941/dp/0812923278; Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (Liveright, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. “The Presidency: The Roosevelt Week: Jul. 11, 1932,” *Time*, accessed September 6, 2019, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,743953,00.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project ; a Study in Government Patronage of the Arts*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Penkower, 1–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Penkower, 15–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Penkower, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts*, 9–10. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Penkower, 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Penkower, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Penkower, 18-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Deborah Mutnick, “Toward a Twenty-First-Century Federal Writers’ Project,” *College English* 77, no. 2 (2014): 124–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Cara A. Finnegan, “What Is This a Picture of?: Some Thoughts on Images and Archives,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006): 116–123; William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (University of Chicago Press, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Saul Carson, “Notes toward an Examination of the Radio Documentary,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1949): 69–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/1209386; Walker Evans and James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (HMH, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1993); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Macmillan, 1981); Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “The Totalizing Quest of Meaning,” *Theorizing Documentary* 1 (1993): 90–107; Michael Renov, *Theorizing Documentary* (Routledge, 2012); Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, vol. 48 (Macmillan, 2001); Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real II: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond* (BFI, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*; Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, vol. 681 (Indiana University Press, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Erskine Caldwell, Margaret Bourke-White, and Alan Trachtenberg, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*; Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (Cambridge University Press, 1989); Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Pete Daniel et al., *Official Images : New Deal Photography* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Gilles Mora and Beverly W. Brannan, *FSA: The American Vision* (Harry N. Abrams, 2006), https://www.amazon.com/FSA-American-Vision-Gilles-Mora/dp/0810954974. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. R. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film University of Oklahoma Press* (Norman, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Bold, *The WPA Guides*, xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Jeutonne P. Brewer, *The Federal Writers’ Project: A Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J. : Scarecrow Press, 1994., 1994), 325, https://catalog.lib.unc.edu/catalog/UNCb2670885.br [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. The most notable guidebook was the Baedeker Guides, which became popular as trains and then automobiles made travel into an exciting adventure that was accessible to wider audiences. Though not often credited, the idea for the American Guidebooks was largely the result of Katherine Kellock, who would become a key member of the WPA staff. See Bold, *The WPA Guides* and Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project ; A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts*. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Michael W. Pesses, “Road less traveled: race and American automobility, *Mobilities* 12 no. 5 (2017): 677-691. DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2016.1240319 [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery;* John Edgar Tidwell, "Recasting Negro Life History: Sterling A. Brown and the Federal Writer's Project." *The Langston Hughes Review* 13, no. 2 (1995): 77-82. Accessed January 9, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/26434434. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. In *Portrait of a Nation,* Jerrold Hirsch’s argues that the FWP was wholly invested in cultural nationalism through pluralism. There is no denying that celebrating diversity became a part of the portrait of America created in the Guidebooks as other scholars such as Alfred Kazin, Jerry Maginone, and Christine Bold have argued. However, the SLHP complicates the extent of Hirsch’s claim. FWP officials from the top such as Alsberg to state-level writers such as Leonard Rapport knew the life histories would reveal tensions in the region that could not be eased simply by celebrating cultural diversity. These tensions become clear in the subsequent layers through the distant reading of the entire life history collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Letter from Harry L. Hopkins to William Couch, May 24, 1938. Folder 1084 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital image: 0898. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. He joined a growing chorus of intellectuals from the Chicago-school sociologists, sociologist Robert and Helen Lynd’s increasingly anthropological approach as pioneered in *Middletown*, and the regionalist sociologists in Chapel Hill debating how to understand communities, particularly those in poverty. See Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 55-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South”, July 11, 1938. Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Couch specifically singles out work by scholars trained in UNC’s Department of Sociology such as Dr. Jenning J Rhyne as examples of the limits of current sociology methods. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Shiflett, *William Terry Couch and the Politics of Academic Publishing: An Editor’s Career as Lightning Rod for Controversy*; O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Rupert Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1929), vii-ix. Accessed online at: https://archive.org/details/humanfactorsinco00vancrich [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1929)*,* 259. Accessed online at: <https://archive.org/stream/humanfactorsinco00vancrich#page/260/mode/2up> [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Couch thought sociologists would be so dismissive of the SLHP that he suggested using the Vance example if there were objections. See “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South”, July 11, 1938. Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Ibid. Couch thought sociologists would be so dismissive of the SLHP that he suggested using the Vance example if there were objections. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People,” no date given, Folder 1165 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (1165 img\_5254). [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South”, July 11, 1938. Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Letter to Mrs. Mary S. Venable from Eudora Ramsay 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 - 1231 from Folder 1098. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Letter to Harry G. Alsberg from William T Couch, April 22, 1938. Folder 1083 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, 1083, IMG\_0872-0877. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. For more on Jonathan Worth Daniel’s, see Jennifer Rittenhouse, *Discovering the South: One Man’s Travels through a Changing America in the 1930*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2017) and Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America.* [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South”, July 11, 1938. Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. National Emergency Council, “Report on the Economic Conditions of the South” (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1938). Available online at: <https://archive.org/details/reportoneconomic00nati/page/n3>. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Letter to Mr. Tarleton Collier from William Couch on September 14, 1938. Folder 1091 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: 1004-1005. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Retman, *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression,* Chapter 4*;* Autumn Womack, “‘The Brown Bag of Miscellany’: Zora Neale Hurston and the Practice of Overexposure”, *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2015), 115-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Letter from William Couch to Bernice Kelly Harris, October 20, 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: 1139-1140. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Pete Daniel et al., *Official Images : New Deal Photography*; Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs*, xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Memorandum: “Program of the Federal Writers’ Project for the coming year” from Henry Alsberg, October 1938. Folder 1093 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, 1093, IMG\_1080. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. “Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People,” no date given, Folder 1165 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, 1165, IMG\_5254. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. 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-116)
117. “Memorandum: Program of the Federal Writers’ Project for the coming year” from Henry Alsberg, October 1938. Folder 1093 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, 1093, IMG\_1080; “Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies”, 1938. Folder 1111 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, 1111, IMG\_1547. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. “Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies”, 1938. Folder 1111 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, 1111, IMG\_1553. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. “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-120)
121. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, 419. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. “Memorandum: Heading to be Placed on All Life Histories,” from Walter Cutter, January 5, 1939. Folder 1112 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, 1112, IMG\_1605. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. To read more about the use of racial categories, please see the Method Layer. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. “Answers to Frequent Queries on Life Histories,” no date given. Folder 1165 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, 1165, IMG\_5241. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Life History of A. Way, Jr., written by Wilson Heflin, July 18, 1939. Folder 37 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. “Memorandum: Notes on Dr. Botkin’s Conference,” December 1, 1938. Folder 1104 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, 1104, IMG\_1332. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Botkin received the following degrees: Harvard (BA, 1920); Columbia (M.A. 1921); University of Nebraska (Ph.D., 1931) as cited in Lawrence R. Rodgers and Jerrold Hirsch, *America’s Folklorist: BA Botkin and American Culture* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), p. 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Hirsch and Rodgers, *America’s Folklorist: BA Botkin and American Culture*, 8; Rukowski, *Literary Legacies of the Federal Writers’ Project,* 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Rachel C. Jackson, “Locating Oklahoma: Critical Regionalism and Transrhetorical Analysis in the Composition Classroom,” *College Composition and Communication*, 2014, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. “Manual for Social-Ethnic Studies”, 1938. Folder 1111 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 184. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1111, IMG\_1547. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Memorandum: “Program of the Federal Writers’ Project for the coming year” from Henry Alsberg, October 1938. Folder 1093 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, 1093, IMG\_1078. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Shirley Moody-Turner, *Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation* (Jackson, United States: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unc/detail.action?docID=1181927; Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. “Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People,” no date given, Folder 1165 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, 1165, IMG\_1541. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Monty Noam Penkower, The Federal Writers’ Project ; a Study in Government Patronage of the Arts (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. 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\_1229. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Earl Wright, “WEB Du Bois, Howard W. Odum and the Sociological Ghetto,” *Sociological Spectrum* 34, no. 5 (2014): 453–68. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. For examples of work about the importance of the book, see Herbert Blumer,*Critiques of Research in the Social Sciences: An* Appraisal of Thomas and Znaniecki's The Polish Peasant in Europe and America, (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1939); John Dollard, *Criteria for a Life History,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939); Loraine Gelsthorpe, “The Jack-Roller: Telling a Story?” *Theoretical Criminology* 11, no. 4 (November 2007): 515 - 42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480607081839>; Jo Goodey. “Biographical Lessons for Criminology.” *Theoretical Criminology* 4, no. 4 (November 2000): 473–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480600004004004. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. John Dollard, *Criteria for the life history*, (Peter Smith: New York 1949), 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South,” July 11, 1938, Folder 1087 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, 1087, IMG\_940. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. “Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People,” no date given, Folder 1165 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. “Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers’ Project in the South,” July 11, 1938, Folder 1087 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, 1087, IMG\_940. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Jessica Enoch, *Domestic Occupations: Spatial Rhetorics and Women’s Work* (SIU Press, 2019); David Gold and Catherine L. Hobbs, *Educating the New Southern Woman: Speech, Writing, and Race at the Public Women’s Colleges, 1884-1945* (SIU Press, 2013); Sarah Hallenbeck and Michelle Smith, “Mapping Topoi in the Rhetorical Gendering of Work,” *Associate Editor*, 2015, 200; David Gold and Jessica Enoch, *Women at Work: Rhetorics of Gender and Labor* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, 418; Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Letter to Eudora Richardson from W.T. Couch, November 1, 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\_1216. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. To be certified for relief, workers had to pass a “means test” that demonstrated their economic need and inability to find a job, which many felt would mark them as inferior when trying to find a job in the future. See Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. Letter to W.T. Couch from Eudora Richardson, November 5, 1938, Folder 1099 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, 1099, IMG\_1246. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Letter to W.T. Couch from Eudora Richardson, December, 21 1938, Folder 1108 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, 1108, IMG\_1444. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Letter to Henry Alsberg from W.T. Couch, September 26, 1938, Folder 1092 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, 1092, IMG\_1030. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Letter to Eudora Richardson from W.T. Couch, November 1, 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\_1216. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Richard Walser, *Bernice Kelly Harris : Storyteller of Eastern Carolina* (University of North Carolina Library, 1955), http://archive.org/details/bernicekellyharr20wals. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Letter to Bernice Harris from W.T. Couch, October 13, 1938, Folder 1095 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, 1095, IMG\_1114. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Bernice Harris, *Southern Savory* (University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Letter to Edwin Bjorkman from W.T. Couch, August 4, 1938, Folder 1088 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, 1088, IMG\_0953. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. As quoted in Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Letter to J.R Aswell from W.T. Couch, January 9, 1939, Folder 1113 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Bernice Harris, *Southern Savory* (University of North Carolina Press, 1964). Letter to Mr. Couch from Muriel Wolff, September 26, 1938 Folder 1092 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. For more about the data and metadata that we used to conduct these counts, see the Methods Layer. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Charles H. Rowell and Sterling Allen Brown, “‘Let Me Be Wid Ole Jazzbo’: An Interview with Sterling A. Brown,” Callaloo 21, no. 4 (1998): 789–809. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. “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-170)
171. Letter to W.T. Couch from Edwin Bjorkman, December 29, 1938, Folder 1109 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, 1109, IMG\_1478. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. “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-172)
173. Letter to Henry Alsberg from W. T. Couch, January 25, 1939, Folder 1118 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, 1118, IMG\_1810. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Letter to W.T. Couch from Irma Neal Henry, November 9, 1938, Folder 1100 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, 1100, IMG\_1260. See also Letter to W.T. Couch from Irma Neal Henry, January 12, 1939, Folder 1115 and Letter to W.T. Couch from Irma Neal Henry, January 30, 1939, Folder 1119. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Cover letter of Edward Farrison, January 30, 1939, Folder 1119 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, 1119, IMG\_1851. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Letter to Edward Farrison from W.T. Couch, January 31, 1939, Folder 1119 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, 1119, IMG\_1861. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Letter to Henry Alsberg from W.T. Couch, February 25, 1939, Folder 1124 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, 1124, IMG\_2054. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. “Memorandum: Work on Life Histories” from W.T. Couch, no date, Folder 1165 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, 1165, IMG\_5245. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. “Editorial Report on State Copy: North Carolina Mill Village Sketches,” October 27, 1938, Folder 1097 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, 1097, IMG\_1182. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. For more about the data and text analysis, see the Methods Layer. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. For examples see Clifford R. Shaw and E. W. Burgess, *The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy’s Own Story* (Chicago (Ill.): Martino Fine Books, 2013); Herbert Blumer, *An Appraisal of Thomas and Znaniecki’s The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (New York, Social science research council, 1939), http://archive.org/details/appraisalofthoma0000blum. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. William Terry Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939), x. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Letter to Annie Rose from Samuel Tupper, January 5, 1939, Folder 1112 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, 1112, IMG\_1600. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Life History of Mary Rumbley written by Ida Moore, October 31, 1938, Folder 674 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/03709/id/593/rec/1 [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. “Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People,” no date given, Folder 1165 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, 1165, IMG\_5254. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Stewart, Kathleen, *A Space on the Side of the Road,* (Princeton University Press, 1996); Butler, Judith *Giving and Account of One Self* (Fordham University Press, 2005); Coles, Robert *Doing Documentary Work* (New York Public Library, 1998); Tausig, Robert *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); Hecht, Tobias, *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel* (Duke University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
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191. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. 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-192)
193. Letter to George Andrews, Mary Northrop, Sidney Jones, Harriet Corley and W.O. Saunders from Edwin Bjorkman, November 9, 1938, Folder 1100 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, 1100, IMG\_1264. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Risa Applegarth, *Rhetoric in American Anthropology: Gender, Genre, and Science* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 19, [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Life History of Fannie Busbin written by Ina Hawkes, September 14, 1939, Folder 163 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Letter to Myrtle Miles from W.T. Couch, November 12, 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\_1270. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Letter to Myrtle Miles from W.T. Couch, November 31, 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\_1279. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. “Editorial Report on State Copy: North Carolina Mill Village Sketches,” October 27, 1938, Folder 1097 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, 1097, IMG\_1182. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Document clusters are determined hierarchically so that clusters appearing next to each other are more closely related than clusters farther away from one another. See the methods section for more information. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. For example see: "A Day with Lula Wright," Folder 59 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; "Carrie Dykes Midwife," Folder 73 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; "Fannie Icord (Colored)," Folder 343 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; "Georgia Negro," Folder 627 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. For example see: "At Father Baker's Home," Folder 61 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; "Carrie Dykes Midwife," Folder 73 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; "No Lawd, I An't Ready," Folder 74 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Letter to George Andrews, Mary Northrop, Sidney Jones, Harriet Corley and W.O. Saunders from Edwin Bjorkman, November 9, 1938, Folder 1100 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, 1100, IMG\_1264. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. “Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People,” no date given, Folder 1165 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, 1165, IMG\_5254. For more recent scholarship on the relationship between biography and life histories, see: Jo Goodey, “Biographical Lessons for Criminology,” *Theoretical Criminology* 4, no. 4 (2000): 473–98; Liz Stanley, “On Auto/Biography in Sociology,” *Sociology* 27, no. 1 (1993): 41–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
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208. Letter to W.T. Couch from Henry Alsberg, September 8, 1938, Folder 1090 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, 1090, IMG\_0994. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
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210. Redding, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
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     https://www.lib.lsu.edu/sites/all/files/oralhistory/abstracts/university/distinguished\_faculty/Durieux\_Caroline\_T13.pdf; Jason Berry, “Up From the Soul,” *My New Orleans* (blog), April 1, 2014, https://www.myneworleans.com/up-from-the-soul/. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
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214. Letter to W.T. Couch from William McDaniel, December 29, 1938, Folder 1109 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, 1109, IMG\_1488. [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Letter to Myrtle Miles from W.T. Couch, November 31, 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\_1279. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Her strong style can be seen in the fact that Topic 2 is almost entirely dominated by Bernice Harris. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Life history of Mrs. Ola Titus by Gertha Couric, “A Day on the Farm,” January 20, 1939, Folder 16 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Life history of Joe Vaughn by Ida Prine, “Life in a Shrimping and Oyster Shucking Camp,” Folder 63 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Couch, ix. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. Katharine Jocher, “The Case Method in Social Research,” *Social Forces*, 1928, 203–11; George A. Lundberg, “Case Work and the Statistical Method,” *Soc. F.* 5 (1926): 61; George Andrew Lundberg, “Social Research; a Study in Methods of Gathering Data,” 1942; Howard Washington Odum and Katharine Jocher, “An Introduction to Social Research.,” 1929; Wiley B. Sanders, “Recent Contributions in the Field of Juvenile Delinquency, Child Welfare, and Family Case Work,” *Social Forces* 6, no. 4 (1928): 648–53. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. 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-223)
224. Copy of “These are Americans – Not Rich, but Free” in the *Sunday Mirror Magazine*, July 2, 1939, Folder 1116 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, 1116, IMG\_5361. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
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226. 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-226)
227. 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-227)
228. William Terry Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939). [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. William Terry Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939). [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. “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-230)
231. 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-231)
232. 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-232)
233. “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-233)
234. 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-234)
235. 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-235)
236. “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-236)
237. 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-237)
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239. 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-239)
240. 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-240)
241. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic* (Vintage Books, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. For more, see https://catalog.lib.unc.edu/catalog/UNCb2431314 [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
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245. We recognize that there are debates about the term "normalized". In this context, we use the word to indicate a specific approach to structuring, which is referred to as "database normalization". [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
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