LAYERED LIVES

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Rhetoric and Representation in the
Southern Life History Project

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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 the University of North Carolina Press and the Southeast regional director of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP).[1] As economic turmoil engulfed the nation, his concern for the region's future mounted in tandem with elected leaders, government workers, and academics. Couch also joined cultural workers across the United States, such as writer James Agee and photographer Marion Post Wolcott. They shared a belief in the power of documentary expression to render visible silenced communities. However, with crucial interlocutors, 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 obstacles faced by the South 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]

The desire to circulate Southern voices grew out of distress over how academic sociology and literature intellectuals 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 backward 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 heightened as intellectuals moved between the academy and the New Deal state to identify and develop solutions. Couch proposed the Southern Life History Project (SLHP) as a special initiative in the FWP to address these issues. Government leaders such as Henry Alsberg, state FWP directors such as Edwin Bjorkman and William McDaniel, and federal writers such as Bernice Harris and Ida Moore worked with Couch to determine how the initiative could best document people's life stories. Relying on the existing state and local FWP offices, the project employed over 150 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.

Layered Lives: Rhetoric and Representation in the Southern Life History Project recovers the history of the SLHP and its efforts to reconfigure the life history method. We employ an interdisciplinary approach that combines close readings of archival material with computational methods that analyze patterns 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:

1. What were the motivating factors that led to the creation of the SLHP?
2. How did the SLHP come into formation?
3. How did the project come to define the form of a life history, and who was deemed capable of writing them?
4. Which rhetorical strategies did SLHP writers employ to document interviewees' lives, and how did these decisions shape who was and was not represented?
5. 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 represent social conditions accurately, and who could produce such knowledge. Our digital platform is organized into layers that correspond to a critical 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] It calls for a move away from focusing on the thought process of individual writers toward 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, editors, and institutions, including the academic fields, higher education, and government agencies. To demonstrate the extent of this ecosystem, we turn to the digital humanities.[4] While mapping serves as evidence and argument about *who* was represented and by whom, text analysis through topic modeling and document clustering demonstrate *how* people were represented. Along with revealing our interdisciplinary methodological approach, the use of layers instead of chapters or sections illustrates how the digital modality of our text shaped and was shaped by our methods and form of writing.

The design and navigation of the site is an ecology as well. Readers will note that their screen is divided into two side-by-side portions. The left-hand side of the screen contains the Layers of our textual argument, and the right-hand side displays: Map Interface and Theme Interface. Readers can engage with this interlinking digital text in different ways. The Layers include links that will adjust the Map Interface and the Theme Interface to match a specific point in the textual argument.

Additionally, the Layers contain links as well as figures that provide digital copies of clear archival evidence cited in the argument.

One can select a layer either on the home page or on the menu on the top right of the interface. The default setting on the right side is the Map Interface to convey the scope of the SLHP to the reader immediately. However, readers can explore the Theme Interface by selecting the button on the top left of the Map Interface. Within the Theme Interface, readers can explore the collection by topic models or document clustering. They serve as evidence for the argumentation in the Layers as well as an approach to access and discover the SLHP archive held at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Southern Historical Collection. Connected and mutually reinforcing, our digital text places data, evidence, method, interpretation, and argument together through text, image, and interactive visualizations, demonstrating the ecology behind our writing and research. For more about the collection, data, and computation approaches, see Methods.

The Layers

Layer 1: Motivation for the SLHP explores the factors that led to the creation of life histories by demonstrating how Chapel Hill became the center of debates over sociological knowledge production and how to define the South during the early 1900s. As director of 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 quantitative 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] Shaped by emerging documentary practices that privileged folkways and 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] 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 own 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 interlocutors 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 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, which they defined on the Black/White racial binary and by occupation. Such a binary was produced by encouraging writers to avoid collecting life histories from ethnic and indigenous communities as these groups were not deemed "typical." SLHP positioned Southern laborers as perceptive about

their conditions and shaped by the past and the present to disrupt stereotypes about the region as uneducated, lazy, and backward. 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 stereo-types 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, SLHP administrators sought writers they believed could access the desired communities, lis-ten, and effectively write the history recounted for a more general audience. White women writers dominated this process because of their positionality in Southern society, shaped by gendered and racialized ideas that White women were better equipped to put interviewees at ease, record information, and access the domes-tic 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, African American women and men were systematically denied such opportunities due to racist hiring practices that disqualified Black candidates and seg-regationist beliefs that African American and White writers could not work in the same office space.

In Layer 4: Rhetorical Strategies and Representation, we iden-tify the rhetorical strategies used in the life histories that were developed to persuade readers that they were hearing the per-son 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 indi-vidual, 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 interviewee's voice

also included 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 the 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 largest first-person narrative collections.[7] However, over 80 years later, few have ever heard of the Southern Life History Project's groundbreaking project or the significant effect 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, believing that numbers and percentages could tell only part of the story. The richness of individual stories, as told from the 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, recovering the history of the SLHP offers an opportunity to analyze an earlier moment where there were animated debates about how and if numbers could 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 understand pressing social issues.

In aggregate, *Layered Lives* 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 understand the SLHP, which readers can see by moving through exploratory interfaces or by analyzing the Life Histories Data Set. We invite readers to pose and answer questions of their own. We hope that by moving through this digital text, readers will see how our argument unfolds in new ways made possible by combining innovative methods with new affordances of the digital medium.

Situated Knowledges

As with the layers, rhetorical ecology also allows us to acknowledge and position ourselves. We bring together a range of theories, methods, and ways of knowing that shaped our training and areas of expertise. Courtney Rivard specializes in rhetoric and composition and explores the intersection of archival rhetorics and feminist studies. She is particularly interested in how digital protocols, such as categorization, indexing, and tagging practices, rhetorically shape notions of race, gender, and national belonging in archives. Lauren Tilton is trained in documentary studies and draws on digital methods to produce evidence and convey scholarly arguments about US culture and society. Taylor Arnold is trained in the field of data science. His work applies and develops corpus-based techniques to study how messages are communicated through texts and visual media. Together, we engage with the digital humanities to bring together our ways of approaching scholarship, from applying computational models to text data to close reading in the physical archives to study the history, methods, and cultural work of the Southern Life Histories Collection. Because this project is transdisciplinary, we delve further into how rhetorical studies, documentary studies, data science, and digital humanities shape this project.

Rhetorical Studies

We begin with rhetorical studies, broadly conceived as "the study of producing discourses and interpreting how, when and why discourses are persuasive."[8] Rhetoric is often figured in popular culture in a negative light as if it is not "real" and "authentic," but only about persuading or convincing someone of something by any means possible. However, as Kenneth Burke, one of the most prominent rhetorical scholars of the 20th century, who not by coincidence lived and wrote during the same period of concern in our study, argues, "wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning,' there is 'persuasion.'"[9] For Burke rhetoric is the study of how meaning is produced, which necessarily requires persuasion; therefore, rhetoric is constitutive of producing the very notion of what is authentic.

Rhetorical studies offer a number of theories to understand how meaning is produced through written texts, performance, speeches, art, images, or any type of communication. These theories involve close analysis of how a rhetor (the agent of the rhetoric) produces rhetoric. For example, how does a rhetor establish their credibility or ethos? How does a rhetor constitute, invent, and frame the audience they aim to persuade? What is the situation or exigence that led to the creation of the rhetoric and the constraints that frame what is possible? How does the modality (digital, oratory, bodily, etc.) affect the rhetoric? These same questions that help to analyze how rhetoric is produced can also be used to craft rhetoric more effectively, which is why many scholars emphasize composition along with rhetoric.

While theories that focus on the rhetor, the audience, and the text are important, they cannot be analyzed in isolation because they each play a part in producing rhetoric, often in dynamic and systematic ways. For this reason, the theory of rhetorical ecology emerged in the 1980s to attend to how rhetoric was the result of "dynamic interlocking systems which structure the social activity of writing."[10] We draw on this theory of rhetorical ecology to demonstrate the systems involved in producing the genre of life histories. As we show, life histories were the result of complex

historical conditions, competition between different projects, conflicting ideologies held by different administrators, conceptions of an American audience, interpretive decisions by individual writers, perceptions of and by interviewees, and structures of power inherently linked to notions of race, gender, and class. Rhetorical ecology helps us attend to the impact of these interlocking systems on the production of life histories.

With the theory of rhetorical ecology, we also draw on feminist rhetorical historiography in our methodological approach. Gaining prominence in the 1990s, feminist rhetorical historiography emerged as a response to absences and silences within the subfield of the history of rhetorics. History of rhetorics is concerned both with the historical emergence of the study of rhetoric and applying rhetorical theory to historiographic methods. However, these histories and methods all too often reinscribe histories and power relations that center White male agents of rhetoric by privileging particular kinds of evidence. Many scholars questioned these approaches, resulting in a "critical shift from historical subjects to historical production itself."[11] This shift brought attention to archival methods and archival structures, leading to studies concerned with analyzing how archives could not be understood "as a passive receptacle[s] for historical documents and their 'truths,' or a benign research space[s], but rather as a dynamic site[s] of rhetorical power."[12]

Central to these studies were feminist rhetoricians concerned with developing new methods to recover voices that have been historically silenced.[13] Among these scholars is K. J. Rawson who has argued for methods that work to "queer the archive" by destabilizing "normative archival practices."[14] Digital methods are often heralded as having such destabilizing possibilities. However, Graban cautions that digital methods must go beyond mere digitization to avoid digitizing "analogue desires" that "remain stuck in a notion of recovery that privileges cumulative advantage" at the expense of more complex histories.[15] She argues that combining archival metadata and data visualization with a critical feminist rhetorical perspective can offer alternatives to mere recovery work.

Layered Lives takes up this call to use digital methods to visualize archival metadata alongside close readings of archival material and computational text analysis. These visualizations offer new ways of seeing the SLHP archive that focus on how the intersections of race, gender, and class inform the emergence of the project and the composition of life histories. In so doing, our metadata visualizations reveal that White women were the most prolific writers in the project, recovering a history that has never been discussed before. However, their roles and relationship to the interviewees that they wrote about were complicated by power structures that they both resisted and perpetuated. Through close reading and computational text analysis, such complications come into view. White women were able to write the vast majority of life histories by using gendered assumptions about their "natural" ability as sympathetic listeners and accurate recorders of information to their advantage, while simultaneously supporting principles of whiteness that diminished the abilities of Black writers and presented a notion of Southern identity as following along a "color line" in which interviewees who were defined by their gaze as neither Black or White were not given much attention in the project.

Documentary Studies

Next, we situate this project within documentary studies. A prominent area of concern is how documentary production shapes cultural, political, and social belonging in the United States. Specifically, scholars have demonstrated how documentary work is a tool of power.[16] Part of this power is produced through documentary claims to truth telling and capturing reality, theorized by medium such as film and photography by scholars including Bill Nichols and William Stott. As part of this work, scholars have identified the 1930s as the era that documentary emerged as a genre for representing social life and therefore a new and powerful category for cultural production. Scholars such as Jonathan Kahana, Paula Rabinowitz, and Trinh Minh-Ha have focused on the politics of representation, asking us to consider who is chosen as the subject of documentary and why, how they are represented, and who

controls this documentary work.[17] These questions are central to *Layered Lives* and inform our analysis of the entangled relationship between medium, scope, representation, and power that shaped the SLHP.

At the same time, our work is part of a recent turn to consider how a narrow definition of documentary may be limiting how we understand the cultural and social work of documentary. This shift has been led by Sonnet Retman who argues that to understand the impact of documentary expression in the 1930s, we must consider how cultural expression does not often neatly fit into a single genre.[18] Drawing on the work of Wai Chee Dimock, she states that two hybrid genres developed during the era that challenged documentary's claim to the real and authentic and offered a space for critique of the "folk," an idea that was being used to define who was and was not an "authentic" member of the nation. Our work is a part of this shift to reassess the contours of documentary and the 1930s.[19] Jerrold Hirsch's *Portrait of America* is one of the only pieces of scholarship to study the SLHP as a unique initiative within the FWP.[20] The book celebrated the SLHP by situating it within a story of American pluralism. On the other hand, our work challenges this framing by comparing and contrasting how the project configured its goals in contestation rather than complementing other FWP projects and the larger ecosystem of social documentary. We also build off of Catherine Stewart's analysis of the Ex-Slave Narrative Project in *Long Past Slavery* that examines the writing process of the narratives to look more closely at the understudied Southern Life History Program. Like Stewart, who illuminates the agents in the creation of the ex-slave narratives, we also focus on the writing process of the life histories, but do so by centering rhetorical theory and documentary studies to look at how debates over documentary methods led to the life histories program.

Layered Lives expands the debate about documentary work in the era. Rather than understanding the Southern Life History Program, and the larger Federal Writers' Projects documentary

projects, as a drive toward romantic nationalism and cultural plural-
ism, as historian Jerold Hirsch has argued, we focus on the debates,
particularly over method, that caused FWP projects to define their
scope along geographical, racialized, and gendered lines.[21]   We
track how efforts to document Americans through life histories
became a site of active negotiation between three ways of repre-
senting social life—anthropology, folklore, and sociology—to forge
a different kind of documentary work. Focused on the present
rather than the past, lived experiences instead of folk tales, and
qualitative over quantitative evidence, the writers listened to peo-
ple describe their circumstances and then wrote their life histories.
Building on research on the debates over social science knowl-
edge, our project also historicizes arguments about the relationship
between qualitative and qualitative research and the *kind* of data
necessary to understand people's lives.[22]   This shows how different
interviewers deployed different practices and how their practices
impacted how Americans were documented. Since the FWP was
about documenting America, it also became a site that determined
who counted as a part of the nation. Looking closely at how peo-
ple were represented reveals how communities were included or
excluded.

Data Science

The field of data science also shaped our exploration of the rhetor-
ical work of the SLHP. While identified as an independent field
of research only within the past decade, core foundational ideas
of data science were first formulated in the 1960s and 1970s by
John Tukey. In his seminal work *Exploratory Data Analysis*, Tukey
stressed the need to "[look] at data to see what it seems to say."[23] He
argued that identifying new insights from data requires the use of
data visualization techniques and a move away from emphases on
models grounded in mathematical formalisms. Extending Tukey's
call to formulate hypotheses through graphical methods, scholar-
ship by, among others, Jacques Bertin, Leland Wilkinson, William
Cleveland, Nadieh Bremer, and Shirley Wu have argued that data

visualizations can stand on their own as forms of knowledge creation and argumentation.[24] These ideas permeate the data analysis in our project, which centers graphical displays overlaid on a map and relatively simple tables and summary statistics.

Critical to data science is attention to *how* data is created and how this shapes which questions and areas of inquiry one can and cannot pursue. Central to our approach has been D'Iganzio and Klein's call for data science to approach this work through the lens of data feminism, which thinks critically about the role of power, data, and categorization. We pair their approach with Jessica Marie Johnson's call to pay attention to the history of quantification, specifically cautions about the enumeration of Black life.[25] In the the Methods, we delve further into data construction. Our process is attuned to systems of power produced through data construction with attention to race and gender.[26] Along with shaping how we created the data, their theories and cautions shaped our approach to text analysis.

Drawing on existing text analysis methods, we further work on how computational text analysis can reveal characteristics about genre and theme.[27] We apply multiple forms of textual analysis to model a multimodal analysis of textual discourse. Topic modeling, particularly after collapsing noun phrases, shows the perpendicular structure of the themes and subjects at stake in the narratives.[28] Comparing phonetic edit distance to an English corpus, we isolate and analyze the use of dialect in the narratives.[29] Finally, by isolating particular parts of speech using document clustering, we explore patterns about the kinds of language evoked in the corpus.[30] In particular, we demonstrate how document clustering can disrupt computational evidence that risks reifying rather than identifying and disrupting problematic rhetorical practices in the SLHP. Our approach blends more traditional text analysis methods (i.e. topic modeling) with methods that are less common in digital humanities scholarship (i.e. document clustering), and demonstrates how expanding our computational approaches can facilitate rhetorical studies and documentary studies.

Digital Humanities

Finally, the project is positioned within the digital humanities (DH). As an area that brings computational methods to bear on the humanities, DH shapes the methods, evidence, and form of scholarly communication. Turning primary sources into "humanities data" has been met with resistance, and, as Miriam Posner has stated, been "a necessary contradiction."[31] Debates have ensued over whether computational methods can even produce the evidence necessary for humanities scholarship, with one of the most recent flashpoints being the dismissal of such methods by Nan Z. Da in *Critical Inquiry*.[32] We see our work as moving beyond this tired debate about if computational methods can be evidence to questions about *which* methods and *what kinds* of evidence they produce. While "distant reading" approaches in digital humanities have been applied to many literary works, there is relatively minimal comparative analysis on archival sources and oral histories. Key to figuring out which methods are appropriate for which kind of primary sources is working with experts in computational methods. As Arnold and Tilton have argued in the *Debates in the Digital Humanities* series, statistics is central to DH and why we wanted to not only draw on statistical methods but model how a trained statistician is central to DH scholarship.[33] We not only hope that this project demonstrates how collaboration across divisions such as "humanities," "science," and "social science" can lead to new scholarship, but also how the "technical" expert is central to this kind of work and should be credited accordingly, as a co-author.

We also draw on a long legacy of projects in the digital humanities that have made use of digital forms to convey scholarly knowledge such as early examples like University of Virginia's *Valley of the Shadow* to contemporary examples like University of Richmond's *Renewing Inequality.* Where this project departs is the combination of substantial textual argumentation with archival evidence and interactive data visualizations. Rather than toggling between different pages, the project offers a clear, explicit textual interpretation with embedded images of the archival source alongside the computational interpretation of the data through a text analysis

visualizer and an interactive map. The text, primary sources, and computational evidence is literally on the same screen. In so doing, we are also modeling a shift called for by the subfield of digital history. In the co-authored "Digital History and Argument," over 25 scholars identified new approaches to historical argumentation made possible by digital forms and called for their recognition by the field.[34] Our project offers a blend of more traditional argumentation (i.e. text) with newer forms (i.e. interactive visualizations such as graphs and maps) in order to model how multiple forms of argumentation further scholarship. Moreover, we show how scholarship can make arguments (i.e. the layer) while leaving space for readers to explore the data and ask new questions (i.e. the interactive map and open access data).

Finally, we turn to our positionalities. As scholars trained and steeped in these respective fields, we brought together our areas of expertise to collaborate and co-create across disciplinary boundaries. This project has not always been easy. Three authors with substantially different training working together to refine the project and find a shared voice was a challenging task. Peer reviewers offered generous, supportive, and pointed feedback pushing us to weave our voices together into a single theoretical framework that was made stronger by the multiple strands of scholarship from rhetoric and composition, documentary studies, data science, and the digital humanities. We have worked to realize their feedback, even amid a global pandemic. There are inevitably analytical possibilities that we, as White scholars situated in the United States, have not explored that those with other kinds of training as well as affective, locational, and embodied ways of knowing would bring to such a project. All data is open access. All code is open source. We look forward to future scholarship that continues to push the boundaries of interdisciplinary, collaborative digital scholarship.

Acknowledgments

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.[1] 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: the 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. He worried that 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.[2] How to assess and represent the challenges of the region became a central debate.[3] Two warring schools of intellectual thought framed the academic and literary representations of the South.[4] 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 not be "inoffensive" books or hyperbolic literature but ask difficult and challenging questions, he contended.[5] 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 that concerning the southern region, written for a broader public, he questioned the field's quantitative 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 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 (SLHP).

Welcome to Chapel Hill

Paving Franklin Street was just one sign of a town on the rise in the 1920s. Chapel Hill was growing as the state's flagship university expanded and approved over a million dollars in construction projects.[6] 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."[7] 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.[8] 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.[9] 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

Figure 1
University of North Carolina boys in their car in front of the post office in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1940 Marion Post Wolcott, 1940. University of North Carolina boys in their car in front of the post office, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Negative. Farm Security Administration—Office of War Information Photograph Collection (Library of Congress).

desegregate.[10]   Chapel Hill's and the state's flagship university's aspirations and challenges were indicative of the era.[11]

The Southern Research University

The 1920s heralded a cultural shift made possible by postwar economic prosperity, an expanding consumer culture, and increasing progressive social mores.[12]   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 under-
way during the late 1800s.[13] Trains connected small towns across
the South to a national and global economy, while the introduc-
tion 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.[14]
Efforts throughout the 1920s to raise the profile of UNC as a
research university were part and parcel of modernization. Admin-
istrators and researchers shared the belief that those who actually
resided in the region should have a say about its conditions.

UNC Press was the first university press established in the South,
and just three years after its creation, Bill Couch took its reins. Over
his next 20 years at the press, Couch transformed the publisher into
one of the leading university presses in the nation, helping to ful-
fill 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's focus on the social, economic, and intellectual well-being
of the Southeast region. The way the press used its pages to pub-
lish 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 17 years in rural Virginia, where his father
earned a living as a local Baptist preacher. Seeking financial stabil-
ity, 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

Figure 2
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Wilson Library, which opened in 1929. The photo was taken in 1939 by Marion Post Wolcott on assignment for another New Deal unit, the Farm Security Administration Historic Division. Marion Post Wolcott, 1939. Part of the campus, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Orange County, North Carolina. Negative, Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection (Library of Congress), https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017801953/.

as World War I raged. 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.[15] 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 a farm. More broadly, he was passionate about the future of the South,

Figure 3
A formal portrait of William "Bill" T. Couch. "William T. Couch (1901–1989)," Car-
olina Story: Virtual Museum of University History, accessed January 20, 2022,
link.

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 next door, the Institute for Research in Social Sciences.

A Center for Sociological Knowledge

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.[16] 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 BA from Emory College in 1904, an MA from the University of Mississippi in 1906, a PhD in psychology from Clark in 1909, and a PhD in sociology from Columbia University in 1910. He taught at the University of Georgia and then served as dean at Emory College from 1919 to 1920 before arriving at UNC.[17] 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.[18] 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.

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.[19]

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.[20] 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 Thursday, 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 US banking system's vulnerabilities.[21] 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 US citizens

Figure 4
Families migrating from Oklahoma to New Mexico during the Great Depression. Dorothea Lange. Drought refugee families from Oklahoma on road to Roswell, New Mexico, to chop cotton. Near Lordsburg, New Mexico. 1937. Negative, Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection (Library of Congress), link.

pushing westward, colonizing native people's lands, and pursuing agriculture on precarious ground.[22] Overfarming millions of acres of land and drought left their plows still, and by the 1930s millions of people were 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 US significantly meddled with and reshaped Latin America. Hoover planned to continue the course until Black Thursday 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.[23] By 1932, unemployment surpassed 12 million.[24] 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 US 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 the 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 underlying political philosophy as New Deal liberalism. Intellectuals from academia, including Couch and Odum, were active participants.

The Great Depression: 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.[25]

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.

Figure 5
A segregated bus station in Durham, North Carolina, in 1940. Jack Delano. Bus station in Durham, North Carolina, 1940. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information Photograph Collection (Library of Congress), link.

Southern Agrarians versus 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."[26] 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."[27]

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.[28] 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's direction, the lab was the first to collect what was understood as objective, scholarly data about Black communities in the South.[29] Their pioneering sociological methods produced data that challenged racist pseudoscience representations of Black communities

and suggested improvements.[30] 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.[31]

While Odum did not center Du Bois's 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, "Cataloging the traits of the South was the first step toward merging the region with the rest of the nation while maintaining its distinctive culture."[32] Therefore, his studies were dedicated to this endeavor of cataloging 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.[33] Additionally, he called for improving "race relations through education" but did not go as far as to call for an end to segregation.[34]

Couch and the Ecosystem of Publishing

Amid this debate between Agrarians and Regionalists, Couch came into his intellectual own. While he was distressed over the portrayals of the region as backward 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 to reshape the debate and characterizations of the region became a raison d'être 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. The efforts were not just local or regional.

UNC Press participated in a larger growing ecosystem of commercial and university presses shaping how intellectuals, policymakers, 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 was the South. The publishers noted consumers'—mostly bourgeois 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, such an interest helped spur the Southern Literary Renaissance.[35]

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 railed against 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 cen-
> tered. 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 numerous crimes against
> progress.[36]

Picking up Davidson's argument, George Tindall, a fellow agrarian,
surmised that this great Northern offensive largely promulgated by
publishers ultimately painted "an image of the benighted South, a
savage South of racial hatred and religious fanaticism."[37]

Entering the literary marketplace were books by scholars such
as Howard Odum, who identified and addressed the South's prob-
lems, 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.[38] 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 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. Though commercial publishers were pub-
lishing 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. Institutions like Johns Hop-
kins 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 the broader public.[39] One

mechanism of dissemination was publishing. However, commercial publishers knew the audience for scholarly works was marginal, particularly regarding potential profits. On the other hand, university presses were nonprofits and had major institutions, some of which would become the most affluent nonprofits 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."[40] If anything, Couch believed the press should be more critical to further rigorous intellectual thought about the region.[41] Publishing could be a form of intellectual activism, and playing it safe was a conservative stance that silenced rather than fostered intellectual inquiry.[42] Such a philosophy helped 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.[43]

While Howard Odum and Couch's relationship soured over time, Couch valued the cutting-edge research on the social and economic problems of the South coming from the Institute for Research in Social Science. UNC Press became their publishing house, printing 31 books from the institute between 1924 and 1934.[44] Acclaimed sociologists Arthur Raper and Rupert Vance produced studies on areas including social relations, labor relations, government, and Southern history.[45] 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.[46] 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."[47] Works like Raper's garnered acclaim and ire for the IRSS and UNC Press.

Like Odum, Couch shared a concern for the region's significant challenges. 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 critical 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 what kinds of knowledge could reveal the region's challenges. It did not 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, necessitating a strategy other than dense specialized prose or faceless statistics.[48] After all, he was earning a national reputation for publishing some of the most influential scholarship on the region because of his belief that books should be accessible to a range of audiences.[49]

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 solely wading in the violent and stale waters of Southern exceptionalism and Lost

Cause romanticism. They were looking for fresh, realistic, 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. 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 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 significant shortcoming in motivating the public to address identified social problems. Couch was troubled over how to effectively convey the social conditions of the region and the complexities of life in the South, when a new door opened.

Roosevelt's administration engaged in an incredible expansion of federal power to bring about relief, reform, and recovery from the Great Depression. Cultural workers, including intellectuals and writers, would become part of the New Deal through a new agency called the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), established in 1935. Couch quickly rose through the ranks. The rise of the New Deal and the FWP shaped Couch's efforts to remake sociological knowledge about the South by giving him and his colleagues an opportunity to produce a new method of documenting and writing that centered the people's perspective. By 1936, a little over a year since its creation, the FWP offered another institutional structure, the federal

government, alongside the university and UNC Press, to experiment and realize a new method at the intersection of literature and sociology for understanding the region.

Layer 2: Formation of the SLHP

Introduction

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). This New Deal agency pursued documentary projects as part employment and part laudatory experiment in federal support of cultural work. They entered the fore over how to document and communicate people's "real" conditions in the US.[1] 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.[2] Shaped by emerging documentary practices that privileged folkways and 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.[3]

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 own 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.[4]

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."[5] 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 to raise agriculture prices.

Figure 6
President Roosevelt signs the Social Security Bill, 1935 (*New York World-Telegram* and the *Sun Newspaper* Photograph Collection, Library of Congress), link.

At the same time, 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 theater 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 nation's strength 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.[6] 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.[7] Other writers picketed in the streets to be included in the WPA.[8] To what degree such unions directly impacted government policies remains an open question. Still, there is no denying that organizing helped bring attention to the plight of cultural workers.[9]

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.[10] Others argued that writers were able to highlight and therefore celebrate American life during a crisis of confidence in the nation.[11] 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, 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.[12] An artist laying piling for a building was as much of 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 Hopkins's former college classmate, Hugh Harlan, joined the Newspapers Writers' Project for Los Angeles County. Professional writers were hired to write histories, conduct sociological studies, and craft reports. Over half of the writers left for full-time employment, 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.[13]

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.[14] 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 was not a clear one into government service. After deciding that neither law nor academia was for him, he became a foreign correspondent and returned stateside to New York City. A writer and supporter of theater, 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.[15] Once he joined FERA, he was able to shape policy and direct resources, which he did by focusing his attention on how the government could support cultural workers, particularly writers. He would soon count Couch among his colleagues and confidants and lend his support to collecting 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 had appropriated over $4.8 billion ($90 billion in 2019): 6.7 percent of the nation's GDP.[16] 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. The monies were sent to the WPA over other agencies, such as Public Works Administration, due to the creation of Federal Project Number One (Federal #1).

Under the Works Progress Administration, Federal #1 employed over 40,000 creatives in 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. Having only 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.[17] 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.[18] Thanks to the support of Alsberg, the life histories project would flourish under the FWP and provide, from Couch's point of view, 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 when cultural workers experimented with documentary representation.[19] Documentary came in many forms, including aurally over the radio and writing and images in books, newspapers, exhibitions, and films. Documentary enjoyed claims that it accurately represented a 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.[20] The indexicality of photography and film lent images a claim to the real that gave documentary authority and power.[21] Documentary—as a genre, form, and idea—was understood as a powerful representation of reality during the period.[22]

Documentary's ascent was largely due to the necessities of the era. Questions abounded about how to understand and communicate the effects of the Great Depression. In areas such as mass media and the federal government, cultural workers 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. One prominent area was the literary market. The publishing industry enjoyed the success of documentary books like *You Have Seen Their Faces* by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White.[23] 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 daily life. The Southern Life History Project would draw on the cultural power of documentary in the 1930s.

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.[24] This idea was shaped by over 40 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. Such an approach could effect meaningful and significant social change.[25] 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 policymakers and scholars identify necessary reforms. The federal government's embrace of documentary allowed for this configuration of life histories 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.[26] 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 became one of the most famous documentary photography projects of the 20th century.[27] Government agencies sponsored documentary films such as Pere Lorentz's *The Plough That Broke the Plains* for the Resettlement Administration.[28] 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 project's main goal was to employ white-collar workers such as historians, librarians, and writers to produce cultural products, including tourist guide books, often with a focus on the unique traits of the nation.[29] Project directors understood that they were able to shape ideas about American culture and belonging, so they set out to create a national culture that embraced pluralism.[30] Writers documented everyday life across the nation and included some of the most prominent authors of the 20th century, such as Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale 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.' "[31]

Paradoxically, 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.[32] 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 comprised a part of a symbolic national library, which collectively provided a portrait of a nation.[33] Such guides were intended to celebrate a new pluralistic vision of America while helping the economy recover through consumerism.

Figure 7
A booth at the Ohio State Fair in 1937 exhibiting the work of the Ohio FWP.
Ohio Federal Writers' Project. Ohio State Fair, Columbus, Ohio. 1937. Ohio History
Collection, link.

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 cen-
tral headquarters in Washington, DC, 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.
This multitiered structure grew quickly, employing over 6,000 peo-
ple 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.

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 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 to move safely throughout the United States.[34] The erasure and 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, DC, which housed the FWP's Office of Negro Affairs.[35] 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.[36]

Launching the SLHP

The opportunity to create the SLHP came during the reorganization of state bureaus under regional offices in 1937. The FWP sought to streamline the reporting hierarchy to expedite the completion of the Guidebooks and to reduce the ever-growing number of conflicts between state-level workers and Washington. FWP officials

were particularly keen on speeding up the process to get the Guide-
books to print as there was growing discontent by many politicians
over the costs of such New Deal projects. It was in this reshuffling
that Henry Alsberg brought Couch into the project.

Couch's editorial prowess and vast network of acclaimed writ-
ers and scholars quickly gained him recognition from Washington,
especially from Alsberg. 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 direc-
tor of the North Carolina Writers Project. 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.[37] With one foot in the fed-
eral government and one foot in academia, as the director of the
South's most prominent press, Couch was in a position to pursue
a new approach to documenting social lives. His approach helped
to move the Southeast region of the FWP away from the Ameri-
can Guide Series, 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 identifying and 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 inter-
vening in debates over how to capture and document social life
that emerged from sociology's use of numbers and statistics often
procured through surveys; folklore's privileging of firsthand sto-
ries; anthropology's method of ethnography; and the increasingly
broad category of "social documentary" used by artists and authors.
Couch questioned how fields such as sociology reduced social con-
ditions to statistics and thereby squandered an opportunity to share

people's experiences through narrative storytelling written for a broader reading public.[38]

He was also critical of folklore's romanticization of the quotidian at the expense of investigations of larger structural social issues, a process that he saw as often reducing 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 challenging 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 Institute for Research in Social

Sciences (IRSS) scholars and the quantitative School of Sociology.[39] 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.[40]

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.[41] 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, according to critics, an opportunity to capture social truths about a community through the vividness and intimacy of individual stories. In order to seize such an opportunity, Couch 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 IRSS alongside Odum. In *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South*, Vance argued that "the warmth of 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."[42] 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
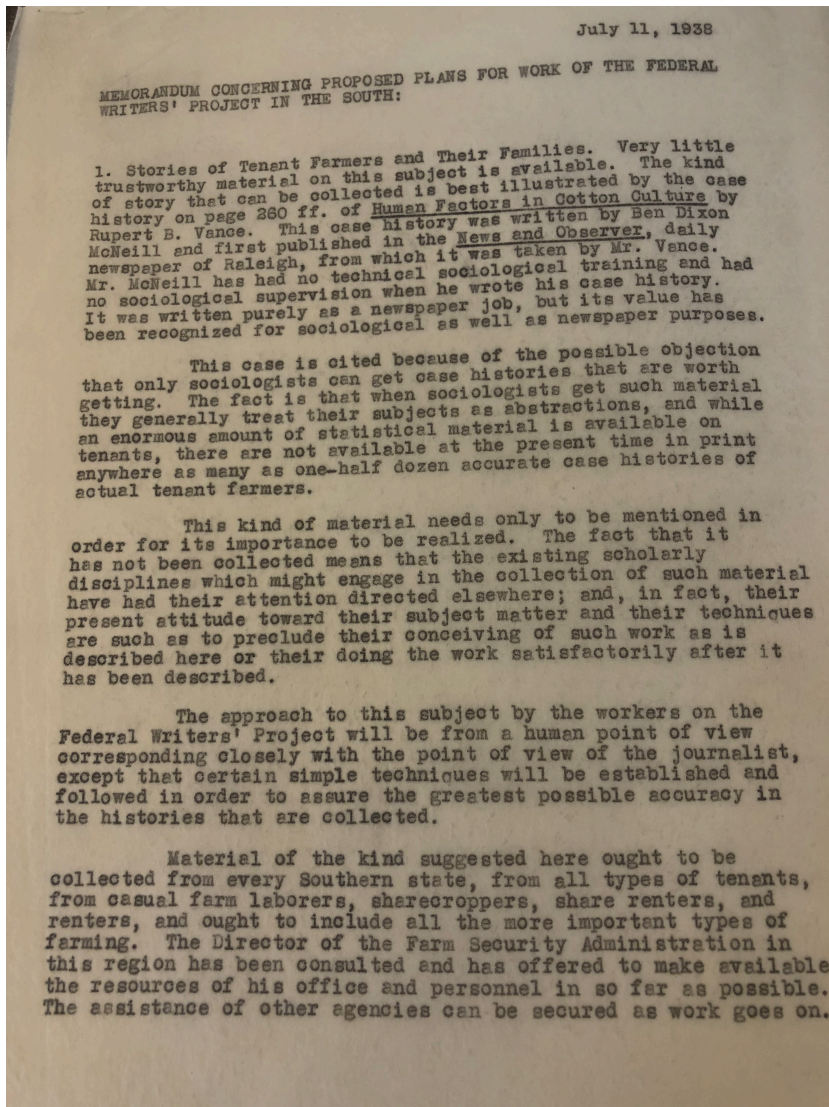
Figure 8
First page of the 1938 memorandum from Couch regarding proposed plans for the life histories. "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers' Project in the South," July 11, 1938. Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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.[43] 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 nonsociologist made "a vivid presentation of one human factor in cotton."[44] 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.[45] Nevertheless, the value of the story to Vance proved to Couch that an individual's history and contemporary conditions—written with nonacademic prose by persons with no sociological training—were of value to academia. Writers from other fields such as reporting, like MacNeil, were a better fit to 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."[46] 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 except among the Chicago School of Sociology. Couch disliked case studies and histories because they often created a composite view or a vague abstraction of people rather than focusing on a single person's life. On the other hand, life histories 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 sociology and social work. In sociology, the use has been restricted usually to segments of persons' lives used to illustrate particular problems, such as 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 … While not important for social diagnosis, these discarded details may well be the ingredients that 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][47]

Therefore, Couch aimed to reconfigure life histories in three important ways. First, FWP life histories did not focus on the deviant or maladjusted, but rather "representatives of the great body of people."[48] 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 to attract and keep the attention of the more general public interested in understanding how people 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," Couch wrote.[49] As journalists, 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 of their current conditions.[50] 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."[51] Because of this method of careful listening and

privileging of the interviewees' voices, life histories served as a pre-decessor of a method that would become known as "oral history." However, in the writing style Couch encouraged, which instructed writers to occupy the gaze of a journalist to document compelling stories primarily featuring the interviewee's voice, the life histories truly became unique. We delve further into the writing style and the rhetorical implications in Layer 4.

Asking writers to report back what they heard did not mean that the writers let the interviewee "ramble" without guidance. The life history's primary distribution mode was to be books by topics including broad categories such as Southern life and more specific topics such as mill workers. Moreover, 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. The books and the questionnaire's sociological bent informed the themes covered.

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 let-ter to Alsberg outlining his plans, Couch wrote that material similar to Vance's case histories "ought to be collected from every South-ern state, from all types of tenants, sharecroppers, share renters, and renters, and ought to include all the most important types of farming."[52]   Along with sociologists, he and the SLHP employees were joining a wealth of cultural workers, from journalists such as Jonathan Daniels, writers such as Erskine Caldwell, and pho-tographers such as Marion Post Wolcott, concerned during the documentary decade with depicting the rural Southern (and most often White) working class by capturing their "authentic" and "real" conditions.[53]   While photographers from the acclaimed Farm Secu-rity Administration (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, fishermen, and service occupations, and topics such as eating and drinking habits, health and disease, and recreational facilities.[54] 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 and 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."[55] 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 in our interest to know in detail all the important truths, pleasant and unpleasant about

REQUEST FOR REPORT

The White House,
Washington, June 22, 1938.

My Dear Mr. Mellett: Discussions in Congress and elsewhere in connection with legislation affecting the economic welfare of the Nation have served to point out the differences in the problems and needs of the different sections of the country and have indicated the advisability of a clear and concise statement of these needs and problems in a form readily available, not only to the Members of Congress, but to the public generally.

Attention has recently been focused particularly upon the South in connection with the wages and hours bill, and I should like the National Emergency Council to undertake the preparation of such a statement of the problems and needs of the South. In preparing this statement I suggest that you call freely upon the various governmental departments and administrative agencies for information as to matters with which they are especially acquainted, and also that you request the assistance of southerners well known for their interest in the South and familiarity with its problems.

The outcome of this undertaking may indicate the advisability of similar studies with reference to other sections of the country.

Very sincerely,

(Signed) FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT.

Hon. Lowell Mellett,
    Executive Director,
        National Emergency Council.

REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT
ON
**THE ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF
THE SOUTH**

THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER

To the Members of the Conference on Economic Conditions in the South:

No purpose is closer to my heart at this moment than that which caused me to call you to Washington. That purpose is to obtain a statement—or perhaps, I should say a restatement as of today—of the economic conditions of the South, a picture of the South in relation to the rest of the country, in order that we may do something about it; in order that we may not only carry forward the work that has been begun toward the rehabilitation of the South, but that the program of such work may be expanded in the directions that this new presentation shall indicate.

My intimate interest in all that concerns the South is, I believe, known to all of you; but this interest is far more than a sentimental attachment born of a considerable residence in your section and of close personal friendship for so many of your people. It proceeds even more from my feeling of responsibility toward the whole Nation. It is my conviction that the South presents right now the Nation's No. 1 economic problem—the Nation's problem, not merely the South's. For we have an economic unbalance in the Nation as a whole, due to this very condition of the South.

It is an unbalance that can and must be righted, for the sake of the South and of the Nation.

Without going into the long history of how this situation

(1)

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600894

Figure 9
First two pages of the 1938 National Report on the Economic Conditions of the South prepared for President Roosevelt by the National Emergency Council. National Emergency Council, "Report on the Economic Conditions of the South" (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1938).

ourselves and our land; and Southerners who attempt to obscure these truths are doing themselves and the South the greatest possible damage."[56] 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 his concern with new documentary methods, he never took up the significant work undertaken by Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and James Agee, who posed pointed questions about positionality and privilege in documentary practices.[57] This lack of critical reflection about the relationship between race, gender, and power permeated

the structure of the 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 would 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.[58] 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 a hindrance. The hiring practices would also be steeped in ideas of feminized labor and make space for White women writers, which we address further in Layer 3.

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,
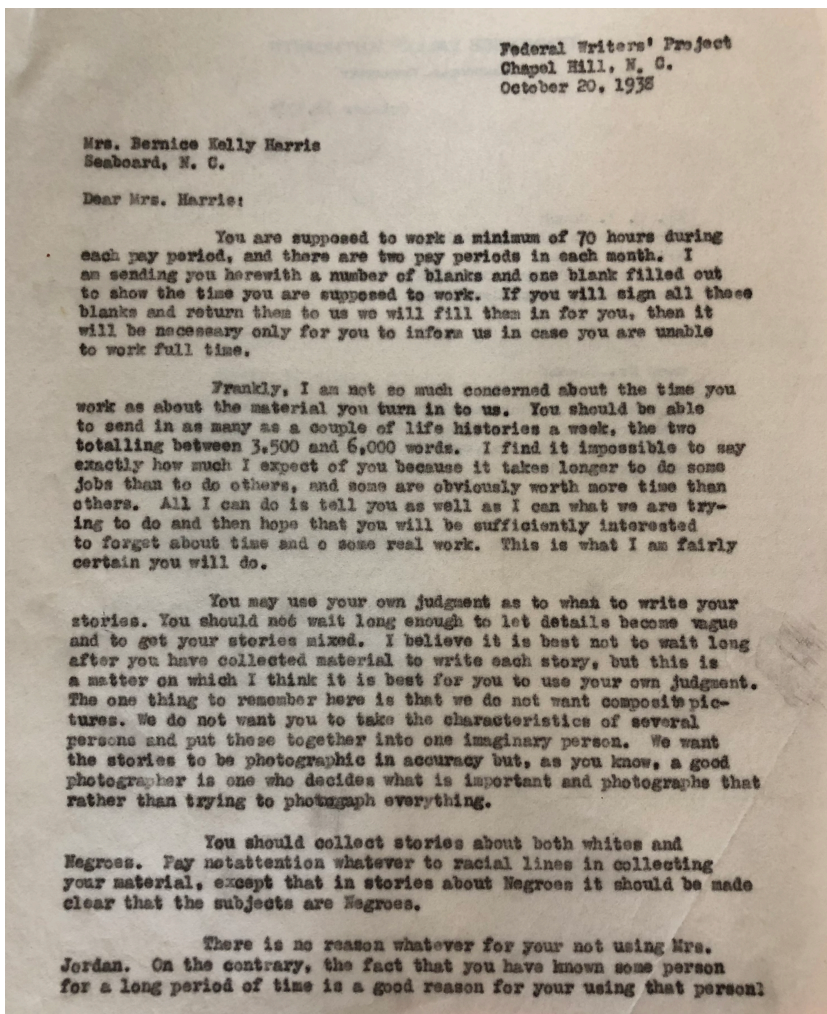
Figure 10
Letter from Couch to Harris sharing feedback on the life histories method. October 20, 1938.

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 inaccuracy but, as you know, a good pho-
tographer is one who decides what is important and photographs
that rather than trying to photograph everything* [emphasis ours].[59]

Couch's directions to Harris and the other writers belie a sig-
nificant question underlying the project: How could authenticity
be demonstrated through writing alone? Photographers working
for the Department of Agriculture and Farm Security Administra-
tion used the camera lens to demonstrate authenticity through the
supposed truth represented in photographs.[60] Folklorists docu-
mented songs and music with audio equipment, allowing people to
hear proof of authenticity. However, federal writers did not have
cameras or audio equipment, which was too expensive and cum-
bersome 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 authen-
ticity as well as what the form and specific methods of a life history
looked like became areas of debate among Couch, SLHP adminis-
trators, and writers. While Couch had larger ideas about the poten-
tial of life histories as a 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 constel-
lation of people and forces contributed to what became over 1,200
life histories in the SLHP before it was forced to dismantle at the
end of 1939. Layer 3 now turns to an exploration of this process
of negotiation over the new genre of a life history using mapping
techniques that visualize the collection at scale.

Layer 3: Defining Life Histories and Qualified Writers

Introduction

The Southern Life History Project (SLHP) emerged at a turning point in the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). With the flagship project of the American Guide Series guidebooks 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, the Folklore Project, and the Ex-Slave Narrative Project.[1] 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 the rush to modernize the nation. In a similar vein to the Folklore Project, the Ex-Slave Narrative Project sought to document the experiences of formerly enslaved Americans before those memories were lost.

   Amid these 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.[2] 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 complicated story about the reach and limitation of these life histories, provoking questions that have not been previously explored in relation to the SLHP: 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 seven Black writers? Why were the vast majority of interviewees identified as White, a small amount identified as Black, and almost no other races represented in the collection of life histories? Analyzing the complicated rhetorical ecosystem in which the life histories were produced helps to address these questions. Therefore this layer proceeds by moving back and forth between the map and archival evidence, linked throughout the text, to analyze the rhetorical exigence or circumstances that allowed for the creation of the SLHP. We begin with mapping out the ecosystem of FWP work, noting the "competing" and "complementary" projects within the larger organization and how the field of sociology and sociological thinking shaped the scope of the SLHP. We then move to unpack how the ethos of writers was established to create notions of who was best qualified to perform the interviewing, writing, and editing of the life histories. Together, these interrelated factors shaped the SLHP's version of the American South as defined through occupation and against a racialized Black/White binary.

An Ecosystem of Documentary

As Layer 1 and Layer 2 demonstrate, the FWP emerged with the desire to create a pluralistic version of American identity. Jerrold Hirsch describes the FWP as both "ideological and reformist,"[3] operating within a discourse that attempted to "reconcile romantic

nationalism with cultural pluralism—two isms that seem diametrically opposed."[4] These FWP programs aimed to "unite Americans, individuals, and groups with conflicting interests, while ignoring issues that divided them, and therefore the project also created a conservative myth that pointed to a harmonious future without indicating how a change from current circumstances to a better future could be achieved."[5]

Such a vision of a harmonious future was constructed by relying on the documentation of an American past that sought to include voices that had previously been excluded from a version of American identity that saw its origin as exclusively Anglo-Saxon. These documentary efforts focused, as Retman explains, on displaying "the vernacular traditions of historically marginalized groups to tell a story of national fortitude and exceptionalism."[6] Of particular interest were groups who, as Carado describes, were " 'foreign in a domestic sense' " who were accorded a racially and temporally liminal status, "subject to an 'inclusionary form of exclusion,' positioned both inside and outside the national imagination as 'original' peoples."[7]

The SLHP vied for resources against other FWP projects that already claimed to focus on such exceptional groups. The Folklore Project was concerned with documenting an organic past by focusing on the stories and folkways of "Native Americans, African Americans, and poor rural Whites."[8] The Ex-Slave Narrative Project worked to incorporate and in many ways move past slavery by capturing the histories of formerly enslaved individuals in such a way as to paint slavery as banal paternalism, rather than dwelling in "the forms of forms of violence and domination"[9] that constituted chattel slavery as well as the everyday acts of resistance. Additionally, the Social-Ethnic Studies analyzed how the cultures of European immigrants contributed to the pluralistic notion of American identity.

Shaped by FWP's institutional ecosystem as well as their own ideological commitments, Couch and other SLHP administrators crafted the South by emphasizing poor Whites and African Americans as native Southerners, common rather than exceptional. In
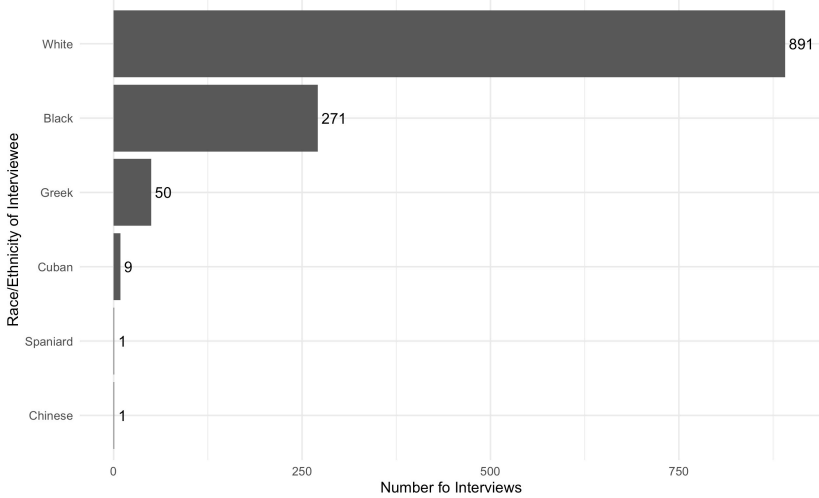
Figure 11
Graph of interviewees by race and ethnicity. image

this way, the SLHP carved out space for itself by excluding Native American and ethnic communities as well as downplaying the significance of stories that focused on slavery from formerly enslaved individuals as the purview of the other FWP projects. This focus on mostly poor Whites and African Americans along "the color line" crafted a notion of Southern identity that didn't include ethnic communities and Native Amerians.[10]   These decisions were informed by Southern segregation, which, as Grace Hale describes, made a "new collective white identity across lines of gender and class and a new regional distinctiveness." However, this whiteness that was constructed against blackness was "always contingent, always fragile, always uncertain."[11] Fragile yet dominant, as we also demonstrate in our discussion of creating the data (see Methods), the Black/White binary served as a powerful racial configuration for the SLHP that provided a way for the project to distinguish itself, a distinction that played into White supremacist logic.

Social-Ethnic Studies and Race

The map of interviews is faceted to reveal that most SLHP inter-
viewees were situated along a Black/White binary in which other
racialized and ethnic groups are largely invisible. 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 cate-
gories by contemporary terms. These include 9 Cuban intervie-
wees, 50 Greek interviewees, 1 Spaniard, and 1 Chinese interviewee
.[12] Moreover, the location of these racial and ethnic groups is also
interesting. While White and Black interviewees seem to spread
out across 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 how these racialized results
occurred, one must begin by unpacking how and why the project
distinguished its mission from Social-Ethnic Studies, a competing
project within the FWP.

   The Social-Ethnic Studies Project began shortly before the SLHP
and was led by Dr. Morton W. Royse. Royse earned his PhD from
Columbia and studied under John Dewey. His early research on
ethnic cultures focused on European minoritized communities. He
went on to work with the Worker's Education Bureau of America
and then served as head of a teacher training institute in Puerto
Rico.[13] Royse largely rejected the idea of the "melting pot," pre-
ferring to think of the country as a " 'composite of immigrants.' "[14]
He argued "the Polish, Irish, Greek, or French population in tradi-
tionally white Anglo-Saxon Protestant New England or elsewhere
'is American culture, not merely a contributor to American cul-
ture … their culture is contemporary American culture as truly as
is the culture of Iowa-American farmers or Appalachian-American
hill-billies.' "[15] These convictions greatly influenced the direction

of Social-Ethnic Studies as Royse positioned the project as providing evidence of the multiethnic and multicultural nature of the United States, which FWP administrators argued should be seen as a national strength.[16] 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."[17]

To accomplish this aim, the Social-Ethnic Studies Project focused on 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."[18] 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," Royse 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."[19]

SLHP administrators used the Social-Ethnic Studies' focus on data collection of entire ethnic communities and embraced the scholarly community as their primary audience as a way to strongly distinguish their project from the studies. Rather than quantitative social survey data, SLHP collected qualitative stories of individuals from their own point of view, focusing on "common" Southerners. SLHP writers documented the interviewee's articulation of their own experiences, not writing about them. Therefore, the type of data the SLHP collected, Couch argued, was unique because it came from the perspective of the interviewees themselves.

The SLHP also saw a key difference in the type of interviewees they selected. Deviating from Royse's argument that immigrant

culture was part and parcel of American culture, SLHP administrators 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."[20] 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."[21]

This decision to focus on "common types" functioned as a signifier to the almost exclusively White SLHP staff to select interviewees along a color line that marked the segregated South as Black and White. Bernice Harris, one of the first writers on the SLHP project, picked up on this cue, asking for clarification in a letter to Couch, "Are the subjects to be white only? There are so many interesting colored share-croppers. 'Ghent,' the Negro section here, has some social importance and much human interest."[22] Couch replied, "You should collect stories about both whites and Negroes. Pay not attention whatever to racial lines in the collection of your material, except that in stories about Negroes it should be made clear that the subjects are Negroes."[23] This exchange between Harris and Couch illustrates that there was at first some doubt in Harris' mind if "common" included African American interviewees, demonstrating how whiteness functions as the standard and neutral state. Couch's reply emphasizes that the life histories are to cross the color line, a line seen as a Black/White binary in which blackness must be marked.

To mark 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, Assistant Regional Director Walter Cutter states, "It is requested that hereafter the following heading be placed on all stories," followed by the text shown in Figure 12.[24]

1. Date of first writing — January 4, 1939

2. Name of person or persons or family, etc., interviewed. In parenthesis behind name give subject's race. — John Doe (white)(Negro) or other

3. Address — 1214 Inagura Street

4. Place — Bonaventura, N.C.

5. Occupation or other status of subject, such as ——— — (Carpenter)(Textile worker) (Tenant farmer)(retired) (Railroad man) (widow)

(In other words, give some clue from the interview as to the group in which you would place the person.)

6. Name of writer — Mary Spinosa, writer

7. Name of reviser, if story is revised before coming to Regional Office. — Bert Aspinwall, reviser

Figure 12
The header of a life history.

By instructing writers to collect specific metadata as a heading 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."[25] The use of a capital letter in the instructions further indicates the way that blackness was marked as a definitive category and whiteness was a capacious default. This categorization inscribes a Black/White binary onto the racialized system in the South. Anyone whose racial categorization did not fall into this binary was grouped as "other," thereby erasing ethnic and indigenous communities that did not fall within this binary.[26] They were literally othered.

This framing of Southern identity through a Black/White binary supports the distinction between the SLHP and 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 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. However, close readings of these life histories reveal that many of the life histories that were not marked as Black or "other" did, in fact, discuss immigration either through the interviewee's own experiences or that of their parents. While the interviewees discussed their relationship to different ethnic and racial communities, writers did not mark them as such because they were read as White. As historian Matthew Jacobson argues, "In racial matters above all else, the eye that sees is 'a means of perception conditioned by the tradition in which its possessor has been reared.'"[27] Therefore, such decisions among the almost exclusively White SLHP staff reflected racialized ideals at the time that Jacobson describes as a period in which "whiteness was reconsolidated: the late nineteenth century's probationary white groups were now remade and granted the scientific stamp of authenticity as the unitary Caucasian race—an earlier era's Celts, Slavs, Hebrews, Iberics, and Saracens, among others, had become the Caucasians so familiar to our own visual economy and racial lexicon."[28] In other words, groups that were once labeled as ethnic were increasingly understood as "white" and enjoying the cultural, social, and political benefits of whiteness.

While powerful, this reconsolidated understanding of whiteness was nonetheless unstable and fragile,[29] which can be seen with the inclusion of the 50 Greek interviewees that stand out in contrast to the general lack of marking of ethnicity. While these 50 interviewees were specifically marked as "Greek," there were seven life histories that included stories of Greek immigration and heritage that were not given any ethnic signifier, allowing the default

norm of White to stand in for race. Part of the reason behind the inclusion of so many marked Greek interviewees is a result of the fact that those who were marked as Greek were part of a Greek Study sponsored by the Federation of Learned Greeks and the Greek Orthodox Church in America originally under the auspices of Royse and the Social-Ethnic Project, and was later thought to present interesting "personal" histories that could be included as life histories.[30]   The way in which some interviewees from Greek ancestry were included as part of the Social-Ethnic Study on Greeks and others were included as life histories of White interviewees underscores the fluidity of whiteness during this time period. Moreover, the fact that the vast majority of the interviewees were actually collected as part of the Social-Ethnic Studies demonstrates the emphasis on collecting "common types" for the SLHP signaled and reaffirmed the equation of South as being defined along "the color line" of Black and White, in which all those not able to fit within the binary were grouped together and dismissed as "other."

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."[31] 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. The SLHP's focus on economic conditions is in large part a response to 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. The unit focused on the collection of oral material such as songs, stories, and dialect.[32] 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.[33] 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 than focusing 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.[34] Shaped by the field of anthropology, he viewed folklore as also an ongoing process in the here and now that offered insights into contemporary life rather than a field defined by the search for "pure, uncontaminated lore" as traditional folklorists often did.[35] 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.[36] They were not just documenting stories to understand past beliefs, norms, and values but instead providing a lens into contemporary culture. Guided by the belief that every group had folklore, the project also supported FWP officials' effort to document and circulate an indigenous culture, which could serve as the evidence of national identity at a time when faith in the nation was fragile.[37]

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 com-munity, including cultural backgrounds and activities: the folklore studies deal with a body of lore in relation to the life of a group or community."[38] Folklore was understood as demonstrating how cultural traditions and beliefs were built and handed down over generations. Capturing the lore of these groups, which included sig-nificant attention to poor White communities, African Americans, and Native Americans helped to enforce the notion of American folkness rooted in a pluralistic past.

To accomplish their goals, the Folklore Project sent field workers to collect "personal stories" from individuals. To capture folklore, Botkin believed field workers 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 retelling these stories, intervie-wees were uniquely positioned to witness and capture entire folk histories.[39] Asking for personal histories was an avenue for collect-ing 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.

Botkin's use of personal histories to gain insight into folklore meant that Couch had to be clear about how the SLHP docu-mented 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 com-mon 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.[40] 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 cultures 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.[41]

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 recovering more quickly. 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 startlingly, 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."[42]

This emphasis on the economic systems that cause social issues falls in line with a sociological framework as opposed to Folklore Project's focus on recording cultural forms drawn from anthropological approaches. However, rather than a broad representation

of all different social types and classes across occupational sec-
tors, 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 the industry; a for-
> mer 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.[43]

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 "typi-
cal" types worthy of documenting. These typical Southern work-
ers are positioned as occupying a working-class 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. This goal is the primary reason that interviews
from various professions, most notably farmers and industrial labor,
are seen across the region as the map demonstrates . However,
one can also note a large number of outliers, including occupations
such as embalmer and preacher. 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, the SLHP collected
several life histories to find the best example. Taken together, the
rhetoric of "common" Southerners from "typical types" of occu-
pations signaled the race and class of the interviewees that writers
were encouraged to select for life histories.

Ex-Slave Narratives

While the focus on common Southerners in typical occupations marked the SLHP as distinct from the Social-Ethnic Studies program and the Folklore Project, another site of negotiation over the scope of the SLHP was with the Ex-Slave Narrative Project. SLHP administrators also worked to distinguish its goals from the quickly growing project. Drawing boundaries with this project again evidenced the role of whiteness in shaping the types of histories that warranted collection.

In a memorandum to all state directors discussing the important projects that the directors needed to focus on in the upcoming year of 1939, Alsberg writes, "In addition to ethnic group and folklore studies, there will be a number of projects carried on covering Negro life throughout the country, Negro folklore, etc." Among these projects included the "collection of stories of ex-slaves. About 2,500 of these have already been collected. Eventually, these ex-slave stories will be compiled, classified and used for a publication containing a critical analysis of the material. Dr. Botkin and Professor Sterling Brown will be in charge of this collection."[44]

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.[45] The project began "partly as an anthropological salvage project to record and document black history and culture before parts of it disappeared," as historian Catherine Stewart argues, that was inspired by autobiographical stories from formerly enslaved peoples collected by the FWP office in Florida.[46]

Similar to the other documentary projects, administrators had competing notions of the scope and methods of the project. Sterling Brown, a renowned poet and Howard University professor who directed the Office of Negro Affairs in the FWP, was a leading figure in the project.[47] Brown desired to use his position to give voice to the immense contribution of African Americans to the nation and address harmful racialized stereotypes.[48] As such, he was often

in conflict with White administrators and writers who presented racist, caricatured, and flattened representations of Black interviewees in order to appeal to White readers' expectations of what they understood to be "authentic" narratives.[49] Among these administrators included John Lomax, who was another leader involved in documenting the histories of formerly enslaved individuals.[50] Lomax was a musicologist interested in collecting folk songs, particularly those from African Americans. Brown frequently challenged Lomax's framing of the project and particularly the interviewee questions which focused on daily life alongside folk songs and superstitious practices.[51] Brown urged for a fuller and more complete list of questions in which interviewees were allowed to speak for themselves. These conflicts highlight the significant role that this project played in documenting the legacies of slavery and the critical role Black communities played in the nation.[52]

Brown also levied pointed critiques of the SLHP for the overwhelming whiteness of the project from staff to writers to the people whose life histories were documented. Often perfunctory, the inclusion of Black voices extended to their role as interviewees, but not writers, as the map demonstrates. Despite the significance of stories of enslavement from interviewees on understanding Southern identity, Couch was not interested in collecting such material. In a letter to state directors, Couch wrote, "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*. If they are brought up to the present through consideration of their full life experiences, including their children and grandchildren and their present mode of living, then they may be acceptable as life histories. However, *it is extremely doubtful whether concentration on any particular group of this kind will be very fruitful* [emphasis ours]."[53] With this framing, Couch positioned the experiences of enslavement of interviewees as not relevant, clearly discouraging writers from asking questions about their experiences during slavery. The results of this decision can be seen in a mere 13 life histories from formerly enslaved individuals.[54] By distinguishing the SLHP from

the Ex-Slave Narrative Project, Couch crafted a notion of Southern identity that was largely devoid of the profound experiences of enslavement that were, in reality, inextricably weaved into the very notion of the South, and America. The SLHP, except for a few writers, would try to avoid the wake of slavery.[55]

Sociology and Life History Configurations

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 captured 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's 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 corresponded to where a writer lived. Writers constructed life histories within their own geographic communities. 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 for 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.[56] By the 1930s, certain schools of sociology had canonized works such as Florian Znaniecki 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 Clifford Shaw's *The Jack-Roller* (1930) further popularized empirical American sociology and the life history method.[57] The life history method became a popular form of evidence for case studies, which were conducted on a person or particular

group by a social worker or sociologist. The collection of histories became associated with White women's labor while White male academics used them to formulate new sociological theories, a gendered labor ideology that influenced SLHP hiring practices. Interestingly though, Couch seemed to have been unfamiliar with the use of the term *life history* among the Chicago sociologists. His letters indicate a genuine belief that the term was original to the SLHP. His unfamiliarity with the term *life history* in other areas is unsurprising as the concept of collecting an individual's personal history was defined by various terms.

By the mid-1930s, collecting personal histories was a common method in sociology, primarily associated with social work and the emerging field of criminology.[58] "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 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 true for Rupert Vance, Couch's primary interlocutor, and from whom he drew inspiration for the life histories as discussed in detail in Layer 2.

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 also 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.[59]

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.[60] 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].[61]

Additionally, Couch objected to the assumption within the discipline that "only sociologists can get case histories that are worth getting."[62] Instead, he believed that nonacademic 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 that are collected."

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 collected 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 information.[63]

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. To reach this audience, women writers became central.

Feminized Labor

Like other growing disciplines in the early 20th century, sociology was influenced by gendered and racialized ideas of expertise and work. As mostly White male professors residing in institutions of higher education worked to solidify sociology as social science and as an academic discipline, they were joined by White women forging approaches to social services across the nation. The settlement movement emerging at the turn of the 20th century ushered in a female-led sphere dedicated to social work among low-income communities. Often founded and staffed by women, settlement homes opened across the United States in primarily urban spaces functioning as community centers offering social services. While each settlement was shaped by the ideological bent of the founders and the needs of their specific communities, an often shared task was to acculturate lower-income communities into White, middle-class, and often Christian, values. They joined a larger racialized cultural and social logic that sought to mold groups into whiteness.[64] These new social welfare organizations participated in a larger conversation about social services amid the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and immigration. Underway was the development of a new professional class with the emergence of the social worker.[65]

By the early 1910s, structures were in place for social work education and professional organizations. The social work career path was positioned as primarily White women's work due to the impact

of the settlement movement and the centrality of case studies to the methodology of the field of social work. White women capitalized on their work with settlement homes to carve out key roles for themselves in the expansion of these social professions as long as they operated within the gendered cultural logic of the era.[66] In areas of social life where women and children were central, such as family social work, White women were able to develop and formalize their expertise as they focused on families and supported women and children through settlement homes.[67]

The development of the field of social work in the 1920s and 1930s further cemented individual- (as opposed to community-) centered approaches, in-person interviewing, and case histories as social work conducted by women. Amid heated debates over the educational requirements and the necessary amount of education that would define the profession, the consolidating curricular focus on the "social casework treatment model" as well as individual and family-centered models reified ideas about women and their role in society.[68] Women were understood to be best for this job because they were central to shaping, managing, and supporting the family and were perceived to have natural attributes amenable to effective interpersonal communication. In other words, social work was an extension of women's domesticity.[69] Therefore women were seen as ideal social workers to perform on-the-ground interviewing and working with individuals and families, while men should pursue the more academic and scholarly aspects of the field.[70] Such logic led to a system in which women worked in communities interviewing and identifying treatments as social workers, and men like Thomas and Znaniecki drew on the case study method to theorize ideas such as social deviance as sociologists.

The configuration of women as ideal collectors of case studies likely influenced the labor practices involved in collecting the life histories in the SLHP even though Couch did not directly engage with the field. Despite the fact that UNC opened a School of Social Work in 1920 that quickly became a leader in the field, Couch almost never mentioned the school in his correspondences about SLHP hiring to Washington. This omission likely resulted from

the fact that Couch wanted to distinguish life histories from case histories. Couch was concerned that those trained in sociological approaches—specifically the case history approach, which was a part of formal social work training—filtered out important information because they "treated their subjects as abstractions."[71] Instead, the interviewees in life histories needed to speak for themselves through rich and well-developed stories that obtained a mark of literary excellence. This concern helps explain why Couch always positioned those gathering life histories as writers, insisting that they mark themselves as such on the life histories, rather than field workers as other projects like the Social-Ethnic Studies did. Yet, Couch and other SLHP administrators relied on gendered assumptions about women's abilities to connect, ask questions, listen, and then write down the stories, the same rhetorical logic that motivated the field of social work. Such assumptions are evidenced when examining the data concerning who were the most prolific writers in the SLHP.

A Focus on White Women Writers

Looking at the map of women writers and men writers shows that a significant amount of the life histories were 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 10 or more life histories. Together, those 30 writers wrote 677 life histories, slightly over half of the collection. Within this group of the most prolific writers, 11 were men, among which only one identified as 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, a fact that no study of the SLHP has ever revealed.

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

WRITER	RACE	GENDER	NUM. INTERVIEWS
Bernice Kelly Harris	White	Female	85
Ida L. Moore	White	Female	51
Mary A. Hicks	White	Female	51
Sadie B. Hornsby	White	Female	39
William O. Foster	White	Male	39
Grace McCune	White	Female	38
Rose Shepherd	White	Female	38
W. W. Dixon	White	Male	31
W. O. Saunders	White	Male	25
Adyleen G. Merrick	White	Female	22
Robert O. King	White	Male	20
Muriel L. Wolff	White	Female	18
Anne Winn Stevens	White	Female	17
Robert McKinney	Black	Male	17
Barbara Berry Dorsey	White	Female	16
Ethel Deal	White	Female	16
Annie Ruth Davis	White	Female	15
Nellie Gray Toler	White	Female	15
Frances L. Harriss	White	Female	14
Mattie T. Jones	White	Female	13
Douglas Carter	White	Male	12
Frank Massimino	White	Male	12
Jack Kytle	White	Male	12
Della Yoe	White	Female	11
Gertha Couric	White	Female	11
R. V. Waldrep	White	Male	11
Ruth Clark	White	Female	11
Leonard Rapport	White	Male	10
Luline L. Mabry	White	Female	10
Claude V. Dunnagan	White	Male	9

Figure 13
Table of the top 30 writers by name, gender, and race.

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 associated women with the domestic sphere led to the idea that they were better able to gain access to interviewees within their homes and to put them at ease while sharing their stories, traits that also led women to occupy central positions in social work. Second, women were seen as good communicators and recorders of information, the same gendered thinking that led them to be favored for stenographer and secretary positions.[72]

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.[73] 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."[74] To achieve such literary excellence, Couch began the project by mandating that state directors secure "the best qualified writers."[75] State directors scoffed at such a directive because of the WPA requirement that 90 percent of writers be certified relief workers, arguing that good writers "are few and far between."[76] The state director of Virginia, Eudora 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."[77]

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."[78] 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."[79]

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 seemed to be aimed at opening up the project to new writers that had previously been ignored. However, 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 skills. These raced and gendered practices can be seen in the way that SLHP administrators especially 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. At the same time, how FWP administrators treated Harris and Moore in contrast to less prolific writers such as Nellie Gray Toler offers insight into how gendered notions could open doors as well as close them.

A Closer Look: Harris, Moore, and Toler

Harris, an aspiring playwright and novelist, was recruited by Couch after he reviewed her novel *Purslane* for publication at UNC Press. Harris had taken summer classes at UNC in English as well as from Professor Frederick Koch, founder of the Carolina Playmakers.[80] 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."[81] *Purslane* was loosely based on Harris's childhood in Mt. Moriah, North Carolina, and detailed the life of a small rural community. Couch felt that her descriptions of these rural communities were

much richer and authentic than other representations of the rural
South, such as those by Erskine Caldwell.

Couch's desire to hire Harris because of her ability to write
"authentic and interesting" stories was also rooted in her connec-
tions with farming communities in her town of Seaboard, North
Carolina. He believed that she could use these connections to gain
access to people willing to give their life histories. Because her hus-
band owned and operated a cotton gin, Harris knew many people in
the farming community. Together with her connections in the com-
munity, Harris believed that she was well positioned to put people
at ease. She explained that together with the many economic prob-
lems in the region was "the need of the lonely and forgotten to tell
all to a sympathetic listener" [italics original].[82]

Harris's description of herself as a sympathetic listener, evoking
her emotive abilities, reveals how she deployed gendered assump-
tions that see women as more "naturally" emotional, as a means of
establishing her ethos, or credibility, as a uniquely capable inter-
viewer. As many scholars of feminist rhetorics demonstrate, ethos
does not dwell only in the speaker (or rhetor), but rather also
with the audience. Establishing credibility and trust often requires
understanding and appealing to the beliefs of the audience.[83] For
the SLHP, the ethos was tied to the degree to which the writer
understood the interviewee and their positionality, including their
community. Harris's credibility then emerges from her positional-
ity as a woman able to be a sympathetic listener among her own
community.

What is not said here, what is visibly invisible, is the way her
whiteness is simultaneously used to give her the permission and
ability to move freely among her town, as well as across the state of
North Carolina, to acquire interviews from both Black and White
residents. In total, Harris wrote interviews with 95 people, of which
27 were from White women, 36 were from White men, 18 were
from Black women, and 12 were from Black men.[84] Black writers
were not afforded this same freedom of movement and access to
different racialized communities as consequences for crossing into
segregated White-only spaces had violent and potentially lethal

results. Therefore, it was the interrelation of Harris's whiteness, gender, as well as her middle-class connections that positioned her as a sympathetic listener, which, together with her writing skills, led her to acquire more interviews than any other writer in the SLHP.

In addition to gendered ideas about women as more sympathetic listeners, White 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 how she used this assumption to her advantage. 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 noncertified, nonsecurity 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 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."[85]

Couch established Moore's ethos by referring to her role as a teacher, her college education, the existence of a manuscript as evidence of her writing skill, her lower-class roots, and her resourcefulness. Together with these specifically stated skills, Couch used Moore's gender, race, and class to task her with what he and others thought would be some of the most difficult communities to interview, those from the industrial mills that were spreading across North Carolina. These mills were known for harsh working conditions and overbearing managerial systems that frowned upon outsiders asking questions. 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.'"[86] However, Moore "proved the job could be done" by collecting more than 28 life histories from mill workers.

Contrary to any difficulty, Moore describes the ease with which she enters towns, homes, and lives in the life histories she wrote.

She is welcomed into living rooms, invited to share meals with families who don't have much food, and asked to sit in chairs that are positioned within a few feet of people's beds in their one-room homes.[87] Moore is afforded access to these intimate spaces of the home in large part because of her gender and race. As feminist rhetorician Jessica Enoch explains, "Gender, especially when it is animated by class, culture, race, sexuality, and ability, conditions where a person is able to go, the spaces that can be occupied, and the kinds of knowledge and credibility that can be cultivated within that space"[88] In this case, Moore uses the interrelation of her gender, race, class, and rhetorical purpose to gain entrance into the lives of the interviewees.

   How Moore accessed an interview with Frank Martin demonstrates how she used her positionality to gain access. In fact, the way in which she gained entrance to the Martin home in order to reveal a poignant story was so important that it was used to create a radio documentary. One interviewee describes Moore to her husband, encouraging him to talk to Moore. Here is the "writer-lady I tole I had the conversation with las week. She is writing up people in this county so's the rest of the world can know how we lives. She would like, as I said, for you to be in her book."[89] While class and race are certainly signaled with the written dialect Moore chose to use in this life history as Layer 4 will discuss in more detail, this figurine of Moore as a "writer-lady" emphasizes her gender as tied to her profession to demonstrate her ethos, establishing her credibility as someone worth talking to. Within the intimacy of the home, the dominion of women, Moore used her gender and the unmarked ability of her whiteness to position herself as a professional writer knowledgeable about the struggles of home life to put interviewees at ease and encourage them to share their life histories to someone who was otherwise a stranger.[90] Leaning into such gendered and raced assumptions to establish a professional ethos was the same rhetorical move that White women performed to position themselves as experts in the growing field of social work. Moore did such a good job showing that life histories could be collected from what was considered one of the hardest to reach communities 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 White women as lead writers who could savvily use their positionality to gain access to communities to write compelling life histories, their assumptions were not shared throughout the SLHP. Other key state administrators relied rather on problematic ideas of women as less capable than men. 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. 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.[91]

Despite the extremely condescending tone and opaque meaning of why it would be advantageous to have half-illiterates as field workers, Aswell and McDaniel did see some promise in three White female writers, Nellie Gray Toler, Della Yoe, and Ruth Clark, who ultimately were the three most prolific writers in Tennessee. However, the promise that was seen was mostly in the women's ability to connect with the community and record information rather than their writing which they admonished with such elite and sexist critique.

Writing about Nellie Gray Toler, Aswell explained, "We've had a special problem in getting out these life histories. Some of the 'writers' could not write. Take Toler, for example. Her sole virtue is facility with shorthand. Most of her papers come to us in such a jumbled mess that at first reading, nobody on earth could make head nor tail of them. It is only after the most painstaking delving and cutting that sense begins to emerge."[92] While with less

malevolence, McDaniel made a similar backhanded compliment of Toler in a letter to Couch about the process of life history collection in Tennessee, "Though she is no writer, she is no doubt our most valuable field worker. She is able and willing to do efficiently anything we ask."[93] In the same letter, he gives "praise" to Ruth Clark, explaining that her "greatest attribute is that she is one of the people. She shares their views, religion and mode of living, and through that gets into her stories the essence of their community life."[94]

In both of these examples, Aswell and McDaniel downplay, if not outrightly denigrate, the writing abilities of Toler and Clark, instead positioning their usefulness as a matter of their willingness to record as well as connect to the communities that they were interviewing. Such painfully gendered notions of professional writing likely resulted from similar rhetorical moves made within the field of social work as well as the growing equation of clerical work with women's work. This view saw clerical work as the "routinized and deskilled" recording of material that was already intellectually composed, leading to the understanding that the act of "writing," as Solberg explains, was split into the "head" work of male executives and the "hand" work of female clerical workers."[95] This formulation of writing devalues the "bodily labor of writing" and the expertise needed to navigate complex social environments to acquire interviewees and choose relevant information to document.[96] It flattens the writing process to the final end product, erasing its composite parts and the labor performed by the White female writers.

Though Couch took a different approach to administer 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 demure 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.[97] 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 Layer 4 demonstrates.

The Marginalization of Black Writers

Looking at the maps of Black writers and 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.[98] Of this disproportionately small group of Black writers was Robert McKinney, who wrote 17 life histories, which was twice as many as any of the other Black writers. McKinney was a graduate of Xavier University of New Orleans and collected the stories of residents of the Crescent City. As a member of an integrated unit, McKinney and his colleagues within the Louisiana FWP demonstrated that hiring and creating the institutional structures that included a wide range of perspectives was possible. The data and work in Louisiana bring into relief racist ideologies that guided the life histories project in the other Southern states, despite advocacy from colleagues within the FWP.

To increase Black representation in the ranks of the FWP, in 1936 Alsberg created the Office of Negro Affairs led by Sterling Brown and state and local offices known as Negro Working Units.[99] Yet these units were segregated and often required workers to depend on Historically 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.[100] 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 racialized rhetoric defining writing skill and objectivity to veil their racist hiring practices. When asked to explain why more Black writers had not been hired, Edwin 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.'"[101]   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.[102]

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 [Tuskegee] 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.'"[103]   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 the rhetoric of colorblindness. Writing to Alsberg, he explained,

> Since taking on the job of Regional Director, I have found it nec-
> essary to spend a large part of my time working on the problem of
> improving the quality of personnel on state staff. I have not recom-
> mended 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 vacan-
> cies 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 resi-
> dent in the states with which I deal, and desiring to work on the
> Writers' Project...I shall appreciate greatly any evidence that any-
> one can give me in locating Negros who are qualified for work on
> the Writers' Project in this region.[104]

Couch's argument to Alsberg assumed 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 mate-
rial" 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.[105] One candidate
included Dr. Edward Farrison, who had a PhD in English from Ohio
State University and was an English and public speaking professor
at Bennett College for 12 years.[106] 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 nonpaid position available as he had worked with others who offered their assistance "on a voluntary, non-salary basis."[107] 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.

When one of the few Black writers were assigned life histories, they were always given African Americans to interview, and their work was continually critiqued as lacking objectivity. In a letter to Couch, Georgia FWP State Director Samuel Tupper wrote, "We have found it very difficult to get good stories written by Negroes about Negroes. The difficulty seems to me that educated Negroes wish to make themselves and their race appear to have a good advantage and they think this can be done by talking in stilted language about things of no interest or importance."[108] Couch seized on this criticism by Tupper that Black writers could not write objectively by immediately writing one of his favorite state directors, William McDaniel, asking him to give "a detailed account of your experience with the Negro writers of life histories" and "any general criticisms of the stories submitted by these writers. I wish you would please state what these criticisms were and what efforts you made to have them corrected."[109] Couch's intention was to compare McDaniel's response with those from other state directors. The quickness and intensity with which Couch responded to criticism of one writer demonstrated how racialized thinking informed all writing produced by Black writers. Suddenly, all Black writers were clumped together, losing all individuality, such that all of their writing was seen through a lens of blackness that was equated with a lack of skill and objectivity.

Such thinking was endemic to the nearly all-White administration of the FWP. FWP staff often questioned whether Black employees of the FWP together with Black informants could be objective, citing their "Negro bias."[110] Uncritical of the racist

logic that undergirded their critique, these White staff members understood themselves as capable of objectivity, again allowing for whiteness to be synonymous with neutrality.[111] Such an assumption that Black writers could not allow Black interviewees to speak for themselves was representative of criticism faced by almost all Black writers at the time. Citing Bill Andrews, Stewart explained that "African American autobiography emerged as a genre that relied heavily on rhetorical strategies in order to prove that the black narrator was a purveyor of truth—a truth-teller."[112] That the SLHP practiced this racialized thinking that questioned the objectivity of Black writers and interviewees while seeking authentic and real stories demonstrated how neutrality was always already equated with whiteness within the project.

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."[113] While Couch seemed to blame the Washington office for lack of vacancies, it was 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 was 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."[114] 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.

A Complex Ecosystem

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 exceptional but rather common workers throughout the South. The interviewees were supposed to give their own perspectives 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 rival projects in the FWP—the Social-Ethnic Studies, the Folklore Project, and the Ex-Slave Narratives—alongside competing methods from the world of sociology shaped who could be represented and who could do the work of documenting. They focused on the "typical" person, rather than ethnic communities, and their lived experiences in the present, rather than folklore or the past. Concerns about the region's economic conditions resulted in a focus on labor. Shaped by Jim Crow logic, the common workers were grouped along 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 also reproduced when the SLHP hired writers. Assumptions about White women's natural abilities alongside their role in society created space for White women to take control of the pen and typewriter. 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 toward overwriting. The most effective stories are those simply told—where the characters speak for themselves, with small assistance from the interviewer."[1] 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, and engaging story of a person's life that was in their own words.

In a little over one year, the Southern Life History Project (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 in the interviewees' own words. This provoked questions such as how the writer and interviewee's

subjectivity should factor into the life history, leading to decisions about content, structure, and modes of representation 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.

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 first-person point of view 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 readers to identify and empathize with people in their life histories.

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.[2] 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.

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" Southerners 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 redefined the qualitative method of life histories from sociology. Life histories had been used in sociology primarily to document those deemed too deviant as a way for researchers to understand how such delinquency was produced.[3] 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 nonacademic 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*."[4] 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."[5]

For the SLHP, 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 toward work and life, religion and morals, medical needs, diet, and the use of their time. The topic models indicate writers did use the outlines 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 document 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."[6] 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."[7] 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 should strive for "accuracy, human interest, social importance, [and] literary excellence."[8] 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.

Moore's life history of Mary Rumbley, a White woman and former mill worker from Burlington, North Carolina, became the primary example.[9] 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

Glen Raven Cotton Mill
Burlington, N. C.
October 31, 1938
I. L. M. [Ida L. Moore]

A DAY AT MARY RUMBLEY'S HOUSE

They still call her Mary Rumbley. She says that she was already twenty-four when she married John Cates, and her neighbors so long accustomed to addressing her as Mary Rumbley kept it up even after she was married.

Above her mantel there hangs a framed family record. It is a picture containing garlands of roses, an open book, and two centrally placed ovals bearing the words Father, Mother. On the leaf of the open book the following recordings have been made: Mary Rumbley born Oct. 10, 1878; John Cates born May 9, 1876; Sam Cates born Oct. 1, 1902; Zettie Cates born June 3, 1905; Ira Cates born Sept. 5, 1910; John Cates died April 23, 1926; Sam Cates died Aug. 11, 1930.

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." When she saw that I was not a neighbor, she got up and came toward me apologetically. "I thought you was one of Della Webster's children," she explained. "Set down in that chair. 'Spot, git down and let the lady have a seat.' When Iry or company ain't here the kitten restes in that chair while I set in this one. Me and him both is pretty lazy, I reckin."

Figure 14
The life history of Mary Rumbley conducted by Ida Moore.

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.[10]

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.[11]

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.[12]

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 in the 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.[13] 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 understood as possessing White middle-class sensibilities, a point that will be discussed in more detail below.

Conducting interviews in people's homes also offered the possibility of putting interviewees at ease so that they would be more comfortable to give genuine answers. A primary way of organizing whom 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."[14] 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. White women writers, primarily from the middle class, enjoyed access to their job in the SLHP because of the gendered and racialized assumptions that undergirded the life history method.

Point of View and Proximity

While setting the scene was viewed 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.[15] 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.[16]   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 without Judgment

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.[17]

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 scuppernong vine covering the arbor and loaded with scuppernongs. 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 scuppernongs and continued on around the house."[18] 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 was continually frustrated with the Alabama FWP's life histories and their leadership, leading him to give 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 tell their own story in their own words as much as possible, and to suppress his own feelings and attitudes.[19]

The writer, according to Couch, was to leave their feelings and attitudes 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."[20]

Looking at the text analysis also reveals the emphasis on reducing the writer's attitudes 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," and "book." 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

> Bob and Christine Curtis have three children, all girls.
> One is married to a textile worker in Sylacauga; the other
> two live at home. One of these, Nora, a petite brunette ~~who has~~
> ~~the gift of determination perhaps from some ancestor,~~ *has*
> made a valiant fight for education. She has managed to finish
> the eighth grade, often walking as many as four miles to ride
> in a school bus. But she is a woman now, and embarrassed by
> being in the same classes with children. Then, too, her clothes
> are old and frayed.
>   The other daughter, Beatrice, has accepted her father's
> philosophy of life. She is interested only in finding a man,
> and she does not mind if he also lives in a shanty, surrounded
>
>   338

[handwritten margin notes: "How do you know?", "How do you know? Quote the people—"]

Figure 15
Life history of Bob Curtis by Jack Kytle.

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."[21] 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 interpretations.

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, thereby shifting the authorial voice, or overly interpreting the interviewees' thoughts and feelings. 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."[22] The report went on to add that "the other sketches, where the research worker is neither described nor introduced, are better."[23] A constant theme became that the writing should focus on creating word pictures to effectively convey that the reader was hearing the authentic voice of the interviewee.

While the form of the life histories tried to assert claims of neutral observation, racialized logic 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 Cluster 5, Cluster 6, Cluster 7, and Cluster 8 contain life histories related to agricultural work.[24] The interviews in document Cluster 5, Cluster 6, and Cluster 7 are predominantly from White interviewees, with no more than 19 percent 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 percent vs. 52 percent). The most strongly associated words in this cluster include words such as "dirty" and "dingy." The use of disparaging adjectives used to describe White and Black homes' interiors extends to the exterior, but primarily with Black interviewees. Writers regularly set the stage by describing the homes as "dilapidated"[25] and with "rickety" steps or pillars,[26] immediately situating the interviewee as residing in poverty. The descriptions framed the interviewee as unable to maintain 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 with 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. Although Edwin Bjorkman wrote to fellow FWP administrator George Andrews, along with writers 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.[27] 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.[28] 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 autobiographical 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 impossi-
> ble 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 the verbatim recording were required.[29]

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 them-
selves, despite the liberties that were taken in creating such quo-
tations. Block quotes were, then, a fundamental compositional
element of the word pictures. They offered to give voice to peo-
ple in a way that other documentary practices such as photography
could not. Yet, word pictures composed of block quotes came with
the challenge of how exactly 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 used to situate a person within a particular geography or
positionality, such as social class, ethnicity, race, and gender. Using
dialect to represent how a person spoke was designed to per-
suade the reader that the story was accurately recorded, a powerful
technique when combined with block quotes.[30]

   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 audi-
ences, 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 his-
tories read like people spoke. At a minimum, leaders like Alsberg
thought dialect would make the stories a bit more dynamic and

Walnut Cove, N.C.
Matt Wall (Negress)
Louise L. Abbitt, writer
Claude V. Dunnagan, revisor

RECKIN' I'LL BE WASHIN' AN' IRONIN' TIL I DROP DAID

"Lawsy, Missy, I bin washin' an' hangin' out clothes so long I don't reckin' I could do nothin' else if I wanted to.......'cep' maybe raise some purty little flowers like them you see in the yard.............."

Aunt Liza lives with her sister and several grandchildren in a dilapidated, three-room house on the highway near Jamesville. It has been her home for twenty-five years. In the front yard there are so many lilacs, red bud, iris, tulips, there is room for little else. At the side and behind the house are purple and white wisteria, climbing over a rickety, white-washed trellis. The yard is conspicuously free of weeds. Aunt Liza's gardening tools are neatly placed in a corner near the chimney, under a tin shelter.

"Yes'm, I works with my flowers whenevah I gits time. 'Course, washin' fer so many folks don't leave much time fer nothin' else, 'cause I got to boil, scrub, rinse an' hang 'em out, an' sometime iron 'em too. That takes a lot o' time. I have to keep the pot boilin' 'most all the time, an' the clothes lines are 'most allus full." Aunt Liza stirs the embers under a boiling pot.

Figure 16
Life history of Matt Wall by Louise Abbitt.

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."[31]

Dialect is a prominent feature in the 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.[32] 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 among the most dominant terms.

Assigned to the New Orleans office, McKinney was one of the, if not the first, Black writers hired as a part of FWP in Louisiana but was not a member of the Black unit.[33] The graduate of Xavier University joined an integrated unit with Hazel Breaux, Margaret Fisher Dalrymple, and others.[34] His access to Black communities in New Orleans was seen as an asset by State Director Lyle Saxon.[35] 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 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 and authentic. However, the challenge with using dialect was that the intended audience was not the person interviewed nor often even a member of the community in which the interviewee resided but primarily White middle-class reading publics, including academics and bureaucrats.

The text analysis brings the racialized use of dialect into 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. An effort to respell a word to reflect how a person pronounced it is often interpreted as a misspelling in the text and is therefore associated with being uneducated or, at minimum, different from the norm.[36]

An even stronger dialect signal can be found in the document clustering model that does not remove dialect terms. The last eight document clusters, 25–32 (Cluster 25, Cluster 26, Cluster 27, Cluster 28, Cluster 29, Cluster 30, Cluster 31, Cluster 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. Document clusters Cluster 28, Cluster 29, Cluster 30, Cluster 31, and Cluster 32 all consist of at least 57 percent 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' voices. 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 group together based on dialect in the topic model. The fact that the dialect words co-locate and become the most significant "topics" of Black interviewees illuminates how computational 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 model 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 further explore, see the Themes Interface that also includes the topic models and document clusters where dialect is not removed.

Obscuring the Role of the Writer

Like the introduction, where the writer sets 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 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."[37]

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.[38]

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 forefronting the interviewee. 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 in the Theme Interface they address as an indicator of the features of social life that the interviewees found important, for example, the

OUTLINE FOR LIFE HISTORIES *

I. Family
 1. Size of family.
 2. Effect of family-size upon financial status of family.
 3. Attitude toward large families.
 4. Attitude toward limitation of family.
 5. Occupational background of family.
 6. Pride in family, including ancestry.

II. Education
 1. Number of years of school attendance.
 2. Causes of limited education.
 3. Attitudes toward education.
  a. Educational advantages desired for children.
  b. Whether worker believes school training is economic advantage.
  c. Evaluation of school system.
  d. Ambition, ideals. Idea of good life. Which comes first owning home or owning car. Does family own car?

III. Income
 1. Comparison of present income with first weekly or annual income.
 2. Actual needs to be covered by income.
 3. Extent to which income covers actual needs.
 4. Sense of relative values in expenditure of income.
 5. What person consulted considers an adequate income.

IV. Attitudes Toward Occupation and Kind of Life
 1. Pride or shame in work.
 2. Influence of attitudes of others.
 3. Basis of objections to or satisfaction with life.
 4. Attitudes toward owners.
 5. Advantages or disadvantages of present life in comparison with other types of life, e.g., working in mill compared with working on farm, life in town with life in country.

V. Politics
 1. Extent of voting.
 2. Degree of independence in casting ballot.

* Prepared by Ida Moore.

VI. Religion and Morals
 1. Influence of religion on morals.
 2. Attitudes toward various forms of amusements.
 3. Relations to churches.
  a. Contributions.
  b. Attitude toward aid from churches.
  c. Attendance.

VII. Medical Needs
 1. Money expended for hospital and doctor bills.
 2. To what extent health has been protected through adequate medical care.
 3. What effect work has had upon health.

VIII. Diet
 1. Knowledge of balanced diet.
 2. To what extent knowledge is applied.
 3. To what extent it is possible to have balanced diet on wage earned.

IX. Miscellaneous Observations
 1. Cleanliness and order of house; number of rooms.
 2. Cleanliness of person.
 3. Furnishings in house.
 4. Sleeping accommodations.
 5. Bathroom facilities.
 6. Pride in possessions.

X. Use of Time
 1. Annual routine.
  E.g., preparation of soils for planting—planting—cultivation—laying by—occupations and amusements during interval between laying by and harvesting—harvesting—settlement—moving.
 2. Daily routine during the different periods indicated above.
 3. Amusements, visiting, courting. Where do courting couples go? Where do men spend their leisure hours?

Figure 17
From *These Are Our Lives*, pp. 420–421.

topic model and document cluster 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 Cluster 14 (with dialect). Rather than represent that back-and-forth through dialogue, 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

The question of how to close the life history was largely answered by the unit's most prolific writers. Some writers, particularly Bernice Harris, ended the life history with the words of the interviewee.[39] 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 or remove the writer. 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 returning to 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 as 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 life histories 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."[40] The edits appear to actually be those of 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 Ida 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."[41] Couch was anything but delighted and commented in the document that this approach was a "Bad ending."[42] 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

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 to 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 be 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.[43] 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."[44]

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.[45] 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. It was not that the literary marketplace didn't respond positively to the book; in fact the first print quickly sold out. Rather, larger political issues and the onset of World War II disrupted these larger publishing plans.

While readers waited for a second printing, reviewers were not always as enamored though they were generally convinced of the method. They were persuaded by the form's claims of 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

Figure 18
Photograph of *These Are Our Lives* displayed in Zibart's Book Store in Tennessee,
taken by William McDaniel.

they are related in their own language, a language so faithfully tran-
scribed 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.[46]

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.[47]

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 is 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."[48] 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 History Project (SLHP) published, *These Are Our Lives*, a collection of 35 life histories, under UNC Press. The release of this book came only ten months after the SLHP began collecting interviews. The book garnered considerable interest and favorable reviews. As a local UNC radio host stated over the air, "These [life histories], when taken together, should give a fair picture of the structure and workings of Southern society."[1] Life histories were beginning to intervene in the depiction of the region deemed "economic problem #1." The book also offered a successful example of why the FWP should even exist, prompting ideas for similar books on different industries in the South and other regions in the US. In the works were books on topics such as oil workers, farm labor, and small-town life proposed by FWP administrators and their interlocutors. Couch expressed excitement and affirmation even as the institutional challenges mounted amidst growing political controversy.

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 scrutiny by Congress, especially the Dies Committee, with charges from frivolous spending to 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 rel-
evance 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 con-
> sulted, they have been consulted with questionnaires in hand and
> with reference to particular problems of one kind or another. No
> one has ever thought that the great body of the people might have
> their own ideas about their lives and that their own stories might be
> worth telling from their own point of view.[2]

Couch's letter shows the ways in which the method and content
were entangled. Spurred by bureaucrats, academics, documentar-
ians, 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 neces-
sitated a different method and mode of representation as outlined
in Layer 1.

The SLHP was not only publishing books about a region but also
offering, they argued, a new way to more authentically and accu-
rately document a person's history. An approach and method that
would make space for the person interviewed "to speak, in their
essential character," Couch stated.[3] As Layer 2 demonstrates, life
histories were designed to offer a lens into the challenges from
the people whose everyday lives were shaped by social forces.
The method, they also hoped, solved problems with other forms

of social documentary. They did not generalize people into name-less 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 catego-rized people into types and groups but instead "accurate portrayals of individual lives."[4] Spoken words, not numbers, offered a better way to understand people's lives, the SLHP argued.

By positioning life histories as offering a new method of docu-mentation distinct from sociology, the SLHP carved out a unique space for itself to exist within the complicated ecosystem of doc-umentary projects in the FWP, most notably distinguishing its mission from the Folklore Project, Social-Ethnic Studies, and the Ex-Slave Narratives. Mapping the occupations associated with the life histories reveals a core set of professions captured by the SLHP. The foregrounding of those from the farming, mill, and textile industries was done to highlight the current economic conditions of "typical" Southern workers to distance the project from the Folklore Project's attention to the customs and traditions of fading generations. The SLHP also distinguished itself from Social-Ethnic Studies that focused on the acculturation process of immigrant communities in the US by capturing life histories of "common types of American life." As signaled by the map of interviewees , "common types" functioned as a euphemism for collecting life histories along "the color line" in which interviewees not read as either Black or White by writers were rendered "uncommon" and "other," thus not meriting inclusion in the project. While the SLHP emphasized the collection of life histories from African Americans, Couch and other leaders emphasized the importance of only docu-menting information relating to current conditions rather than the past, and most notably slavery. With this emphasis on the present, the SLHP distinguished itself from the Ex-Slave Narrative project, thereby effectively downplaying histories of enslavement from the project. Taken together, the decisions constructed a unique niche

for the SLHP among other FWP initiatives and constructed a particular notion of Southern identity that was palatable for a White, middle-class readership participating in the literary marketplace.[5]

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."[6] Registering the use of "our neighbors" signals 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 *Time* magazine explained, the book "gives the South its most pungent picture of common life."[7] In both cases, the lives represented in *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."[8]

The SLHP also was reconfiguring *who* a writer was. They sought writers who could produce clear and easy-to-read prose, unencumbered by academic and especially sociological goals. They did not want people who had been disciplined into the dense and often convoluted prose of academia but rather could write only what they saw and heard. The move was often an unwelcome challenge to notions of expertise, particularly from those with advanced degrees and residing in institutions of higher education. This conception of a good writer resulted in expanding who could be a social documentarian, which came to include creative writers, reporters, and secretaries.

The expansion of the idea of a qualified writer was also built on critical assumptions about distance and interpersonal connection. As the Map Interface and Layer 3 show, 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.

Moreover, this need to establish an intimate connection to conduct a good interview opened up a unique space for some women writers. 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. This imbalance was due to gendered and raced assumptions that informed SLHP administrators' ideas of who constituted the most qualified writer able to conduct "real" and authentic interviews often taking place in people's homes. SLHP leaders drew on social and cultural ideas that associated women with the domestic sphere and social work. Women were believed to be predisposed to listen and connect with people due to their "natural" familial instincts, an asset to the life history method. Like the field of social work, the SLHP understood interviewing and documenting as women's work. The confluence of assumptions left space for women to conduct, document, and craft life histories.

These gendered assumptions did not extend to Black women. 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.[9] Additionally, they argued that there were not enough skilled Black writers who qualified for relief. 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 as revealed in Layer 4. 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 *Charlotte Observer* wrote, "Here in these pages the people speak for themselves … After reading this book it is not possible to doubt the authenticity of the stories."[10] 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 the 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.[11] 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."[12] 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 by the use of photography. 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."[13] 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 brought 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 acquiring at least 25 percent of its budget from local contributions. The role of positions such as regional director of the FWP was in flux as power and authority were 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 disbanding. The change also came as the federal government retooled for world war. The fight against fascism meant millions of new jobs, and postwar capitalism meant the economy roared, at least for a burgeoning and quickly growing White middle class.[14] 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 waned as social concerns shifted toward world war.

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. Embedded within such debates are also struggles 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 lenses 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.

Methods

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.[1] 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.[2] Most life histories have 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 most interviews 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*.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5] 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 it must be done with careful attention to binaries, hierarchies, and classifications.[6] Because we were interested in understanding the gender and 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 was inconsistently documented, though. Since we were interested in 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 digital humanities initiatives such as #transformdh and #dhpoco have elucidated.[7] 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 these 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. The categories, and process of creating the data, revealed how the SLHP writers primarily sought life histories along a Black/White binary or, in the words of W.E.B. DuBois, along "the color line" of the segregated South.[8] The category of "Other" indicated the disinterest in further classifying and identifying groups in the region. They were literally the "other"

compared to the primary focus: people who resided in the region who identified along a Black/White binary.

In an effort to account for the complicated relationship between race and ethnicity, the SLHP at times included categories such as Greek or Swedish. These categories should be used carefully, however, because the labels are inconsistently applied. For example, interviews of Greek families sometimes describe the interviewees as "White" and other times as "Greek." However, the focus on ethnic communities is, for the most part, specific projects that were commissioned by an outside group or repurposed from another FWP project, particularly from Social-Ethnic surveys. Drawing on concepts such as data feminism to use data to reveal marginalized voices, we included an additional field to capture more granular ethnic categories that can be inferred from the text.[9] We recognize that one must approach with caution the process of racial and ethnic categorization, but we hope that the data set at least offers metadata that disrupts the Black/White binary. We return to D'Ignazio and Klein's point that "what gets counted counts" and queries to this dataset by ethnicity will render visible stories that were not prioritized.

The racial logic of the SLHP extended to the hiring and assignments of writers. Writers who were identified as White were allowed to interview anyone, and writers who were identified as Black were primarily assigned to interview those who identified as Black. 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." As a result, the metadata about the interviews mostly reflect the logic of the SLHP and 1930s because the aim of this project was to understand the gender and racial formations of the SLHP that then shaped whose stories were (and were not) told and how.

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 split 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 are made relating 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).[10] 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; the internal consistency of the records was checked with a set of unit tests.[11] The points on the interactive map and embedded figures in this project were all created using this metadata.

Map: Spatial Analysis

The main visualization element when first landing on the project is a large interactive map of the southeastern United States. The default map shows the locations where interviews in the SLHP took place through the use of round dots overlaid on a minimal map of the United States. An analysis of the spatial elements of the collection shapes, in particular, the work in Layer 3, but is present throughout the entire project.

Information about the location where each interview took place was included in the metadata discussed in the previous section. In the archival data, interviews have different levels of specificity of their spatial location. Almost all provide a state and city. Some include a neighborhood name or even an exact street address. For the map, we needed to associate each location with specific longitude and latitude coordinates. Because of the desired scale of the map, we worked only with city and state information. To accomplish the mapping to coordinates, we started by using a computational method through the GeoNames database.[12] When a city was found in the database, we used the listed longitude and latitude associated with the center of the city. After this process, we found two dozen cities that were not exact matches. For these, we manually figured out how to map the location to coordinates. Most of these were either small towns that no longer exist or unofficial locations (such as the name of a farm) that we were able to locate by looking closely at the interview text.

On each of the interactive maps, there is a point for each location associated with an interview in a given category. The area of the point is proportional to the number of interviews in one location. The area of the point is fixed by the map distance, meaning that when the map is zoomed into, the circles become larger in absolute terms but cover (approximately) the same area of the map. We found through user testing that this approach was much easier to follow and visually engaging at high levels of zoom. Points on the map are given an opaque color so that points for nearby towns can be seen even when one town has a large number of interviews. On

the maps which are colored in different colors based on metadata, such as the prolific interviewers, there are a few cases where multiple colors would need to be associated with the same location. To allow visitors to click on both points, we ensure that the larger dot is behind the smaller one. Further technical details about the construction of the interactive map in JavaScript are given in the Digital Platform section below.

Themes: Text Analysis

Layer 4, alongside other archival evidence, presents several computational models to help understand and organize the 1,248 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 1.106 life histories. Finally, these were cleaned to remove headers and instances of "[text not clear]" within the machine-readable text.[13]

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 word forms 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.[14] The package applies prebuilt models to split the text into individual words and punctuation marks (tokenization), construct standardized forms of the words (lemmatization), and tag each word with a part-of-speech code.[15] Using this information, we constructed counts of lemmas for all lemmas tagged as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.[16] 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.[17] The topic model and document cluster can be explored in the Theme Interface.

One challenge with the life histories is the use of a significant amount of "eye dialect," in which words are intentionally misspelled to signal what are problematically called "nonstandard" pronunciations.[18] Examples include "git" for "get" and "wuz" for "was." 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.[19] Then, we looked at the most overrepresented words in interviews of Black interviewees 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 do 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 topic models to construct the models.[20] LDA is a common and well-known technique in digital humanities and digital history research that calculates a probability for word co-occurrence.[21] 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 digital humanities 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.[22] We used the implementation from the R package casl to apply this algorithm.[23] 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 4 subgroups. Applying again yields 8 subgroups, then 16, 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 is made available under the open-source GNU Public License (GPL-2).[24] 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 forms of academic scholarship, including what counts as evidence, ways of knowing,

and communicating knowledge. Along with archival evidence, the creation, analysis, and communication of data sit at the core of this project. The digital platform offered an opportunity to make visible *what* kinds of 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 own 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.[25]

The platform is designed to pair text and interactive visualizations to convey the project's arguments and scope. The project is structured in layers. As 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 digital humanities. As scholars such as Tara McPherson, Jentery Sayers, and Lev Manovich have argued, the digital humanities remains a text-heavy field.[26] The call to use the affordances of computational methods as 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 used visualizations such as maps to convey

scholarly knowledge and arguments. Our 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 a 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.[27] 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.[28] This projection preserves areas and more accurately represents distances between points when compared to a Mercator projection.[29] Map tiles were created using the Geospatial Data Abstraction Library (GDAL).[30] 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.[31] 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.

Notes

Introduction

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3. For more on the history of the Great Depression by state, see: Douglas Carl Abrams, *Conservative Constraints: North Carolina and the New Deal* (University Press of Mississippi, 1992); Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal* (University Press of Kentucky, 2006); George Blakey, *Hard Times and the New Deal in Kentucky, 1929–1939* (University Press of Kentucky, 1986); Jack Irby Hayes, *South Carolina and the New Deal* (University of South Carolina Press, 2001); Ronald L. Heinemann, *Depression and New Deal in Virginia: The Enduring Dominion* (University of Virginia Press, 1983); Douglas Smith, *The New Deal in the Urban South* (Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Jerry Bruce Thomas, *An Appalachian New Deal: West Virginia in the Great Depression* (University Press of Kentucky, 1998).

4. Christopher M. Duncan, *Fugitive Theory: Political Theory, the Southern Agrarians, and America* (Lexington Books, 2000); Bob Holladay, "The Gods That Failed: Agrarianism, Regionalism, and the Nashville-Chapel Hill Highway," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2005): 284–307; Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Louisiana State University Press, 1930).

5. Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945* (University of North Carolina Press Books, 1982), 273.

6. Ryan Davis, "Chapel Hill in the Depression," *Daily Tar Heel*, March 16, 2009, [link].

7. "Graham Memorial," Names in Brick and Stone: Histories from UNC's Built Landscape, accessed September 23, 2019, [link].

8. Helen Oldham Dennis, "Graham, Edward Kidder," NCPEDIA, accessed September 23, 2019, [link].

9. Reiko Hillyer, *Designing Dixie: Tourism, Memory, and Urban Space in the New South* (University of Virginia Press, 2015), [link].

10. James Atwater, "Interview with James Atwater," February 28, 2001, Interview K-0201, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), [link]; Rebecca Clark, "Interview with Rebecca Clark," June 21, 2000, Interview K-0536, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), [link].

11. White women were allowed to enroll in the university as transfer students beginning in the early 1900s but could not enter as freshmen until 1940. The first Black woman (Karen Lynn Parker) attended UNC in 1963. Pamela Dean, *Women on the Hill: A History of Women at UNC* (Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1987); "Karen L. Parker Diary, Letter, and Clippings, 1963–1966," Collection no. 05275-z, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, [link].

12. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (Vintage Books, 2004), 1; Hale, *Making Whiteness*.

13. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*; C. Van Woodward, *Origins of the New South: 1877–1915* (Louisiana State University Press, 1951); Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (Verso, 1996).

14. For example, Tulane University and the University of Virginia articulated such aspirations under the leadership of Edwin Alderman. The connections between UNC and UVa continue. Born in North Carolina and a graduate of UNC, Alderman, who served as president of Tulane and then UVa, spoke at the UNC presidential inauguration of Graham. UVa would also receive support from the Rockefeller Foundation to create a social science institute, which would result in the largest area of expansion in faculty and also be called the IRSS. For more info, see Dumas Malone, *Edwin A. Alderman* (Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1940).

15. Singal, *The War Within*, 273; Orvin Lee Shiflett, *William Terry Couch and the Politics of Academic Publishing: An Editor's Career as Lightning Rod for Controversy* (McFarland, 2015).

16. David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (University of North Carolina Press Books, 2000); "UNC Will Remove Plaques at Kenan Stadium Honoring Kenan Family Member Who Had Ties to Wilmington Massacre," *WralSPORTSfan*, October 3, 2018, [link].

17. Lynn Moss Sanders, *Howard W. Odum's Folklore Odyssey: Transformation to Tolerance through African American Folk Studies* (University of Georgia Press, 2003).

18. Sanders, *Howard W. Odum's Folklore Odyssey*, ix–x.

19. Sanders, 4.

20. The journal was originally named the *Journal of Social Forces* and changed to *Social Forces* in 1925.

21. Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

22. Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Harvard University Press, 2009); Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Richard Edwards, Jacob K. Friefeld, and Rebecca S. Wingo, *Homesteading the Plains: Toward a New History* (University of Nebraska Press, 2017); Jean M. O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2004).

23. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*.

24. Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (University of Illinois Press, 1977), 2.

25. Hale, *Making Whiteness*; Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*.

26. Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand*.

27. As quoted in Fred Hobson, *Tell about the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 180–81.

28. Howard W. Odum, "Promise and Prospect of the South: 'A Test of American Regionalism,'" *Proceedings of the Annual Session (Southern Political Science Association)*, no. 8 (1935): 8–18.

29. Earl Wright, "W.E.B. Du Bois, Howard W. Odum and the Sociological Ghetto," *Sociological Spectrum* 34, no. 5 (2014): 453–68.

30. Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Rusert, eds., *W.E.B Du Bois's Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2018).

31. Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied*: *W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (University of California Press, 2017).

32. Sanders, *Howard W. Odum's Folklore Odyssey*, 6.

33. Odum, "Promise and Prospect of the South," 16.

34. Holladay, "The Gods That Failed," 300.

35. Sarah Gardner, *Reviewing the South* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

36. As quoted in Hobson, *Tell about the South*, 183.

37. Ibid.

38. Gardner, *Reviewing the South*, 9.

39. Peter Givler, "University Press Publishing in the United States," Association of University Presses, accessed September 23, 2019, [link].

40. Singal, *The War Within*, 273.

41. Singal, 274.

42. Shiflett, *William Terry Couch and the Politics of Academic Publishing*.

43. Singal, *The War Within*, 278.

44. "History of the Odum Institute," The Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, accessed September 23, 2019, [link].

45. Singal, *The War Within*, 276.

46. Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (University of North Carolina Press, 1933).

47. Rayford W. Logan, review of *The Tragedy of Lynching*, by Arthur Raper, *Journal of Negro History* 18, no. 4 (1933): 484–86, [link].

48. Singal, *The War Within*, 271.

49. Shiflett, *William Terry Couch and the Politics of Academic Publishing*; Singal, *The War Within*.

Layer 2: Formation of the SLHP

1. Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Wendy Griswold, *American Guides: The Federal Writers' Project and the Casting of American Culture* (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* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project; a Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (University of Illinois Press, 1977).

2. Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (Verso, 1994); Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*; Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Sonnet H. Retman, *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression* (Duke University Press, 2011).

3. 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*; Retman, *Real Folks*; Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*.

4. 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* (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); Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (Liveright, 2014).

5. "The Presidency: The Roosevelt Week: July 11, 1932," *Time*, accessed September 6, 2019, [link].

6. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1998).

7. Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 15.

8. Penkower, 1–2.

9. Penkower, 15–16.

10. Penkower, 10.

11. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*.

12. Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project*, 9–10.

13. Penkower, 16–17.

14. Penkower, 20.

15. Penkower, 18–20.

16. Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933–1956* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 87.

17. Deborah Mutnick, "Toward a Twenty-First-Century Federal Writers' Project," *College English* 77, no. 2 (2014): 124–45.

18. Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

19. Cara A. Finnegan, "What Is This a Picture Of?: Some Thoughts on Images and Archives," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006): 116–23; William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (University of Chicago Press, 1973).

20. Saul Carson, "Notes toward an Examination of the Radio Documentary," *Hollywood Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1949): 69–74, 10.2307/1209386;

Walker Evans and James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001).

21. Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford University Press, 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/Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

22. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*; Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, vol. 681 (Indiana University Press, 1991).

23. Erskine Caldwell, Margaret Bourke-White, and Alan Trachtenberg, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (University of Georgia Press, 1995).

24. Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*; Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (Cambridge University Press, 1989); Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*.

25. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*.

26. Pete Daniel et al., *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987).

27. Gilles Mora and Beverly W. Brannan, *FSA: The American Vision* (Harry N. Abrams, 2006).

28. R. Snyder, *Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1968).

29. Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal*, 47.

30. Bold, *The WPA Guides*, xiv.

31. Jeutonne P. Brewer, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Bibliography* (Scarecrow Press, 1994), 325, [link].

32. 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*.

33. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*.

34. Michael W. Pesses, "Road Less Traveled: Race and American Automobility," *Mobilities* 12 no. 5 (2017): 677–691.

35. 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.

36. Jerrold Hirsch argues that the FWP was wholly invested in cultural nationalism through pluralism in *Portrait of America*. 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.

37. 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.

38. 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 University Press, 2001), 55–56.

39. "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.

40. "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans."

41. Orvin Lee Shiflett, *William Terry Couch and the Politics of Academic Publishing: An Editor's Career as Lightning Rod for Controversy* (McFarland, 2015); O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*.

42. Rupert Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture: A Study in the Social Geography of the American South* (University of North Carolina Press, 1929), vii–ix. Accessed online at: [link].

43. Vance, *Human Factors in Cotton Culture.*

44. Vance.

45. Couch thought sociologists would dismiss the SLHP and suggested using the Vance example if there were objections. See "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans."

46. "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans."

47. "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. See Figure 27.

48. "Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People."

49. "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans."

50. "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans."

51. 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. See Figure 29.

52. 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. See Figure 28.

53. For more on Jonathan Worth Daniels, see Jennifer Rittenhouse, *Discovering the South: One Man's Travels through a Changing America in the 1930s* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017) and Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America.*

54. "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans."

55. National Emergency Council, "Report on the Economic Conditions of the South" (Government Printing Office, 1938). Available online at: [link].

56. 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. See Figure 79..

57. 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), 115–33.

58. William Terry Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939), xi-xiv.

59. 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. See Figure 35.

60. Pete Daniel et al., *Official Images*; Cara Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Smithsonian, 2003), xiv.

Layer 3: Defining Life Histories and Qualified Writers

1. 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. See Figure 30.

2. Memorandum: "Program of the Federal Writers' Project for the Coming Year."

3. Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

4. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 4.

5. Hirsch, 3.

6. Sonnet H. Retman, *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression* (Duke University Press, 2011), 13.

7. As cited in Retman, *Real Folks*, 14–15.

8. Retman, *Real Folks*, 14.

9. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.

10. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 1994), 5.

11. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (Vintage, 2010), 8.

12. 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 interviewees using this ethnic category.

13. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 27–28.

14. Susan Schulten, "How to See Colorado: The Federal Writers' Project, American Regionalism, and the 'Old New Western History,'" *Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2005): 60.

15. As quoted in Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 137–38.

16. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 33.

17. "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. See Figure 31.

18. "Memorandum: Program of the Federal Writers' Project for the Coming Year."

19. "Memorandum: Program of the Federal Writers' Project for the Coming Year."

20. "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. See Figure 33.

21. William Terry Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939), xi-x, 419.

22. Letter to W. T. Couch from Bernice Harris, October 15, 1938. Folder 1095 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See Figure 34.

23. Letter to Bernice Harris from W. T. Couch, 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. See Figure 35.

24. "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. See Figure 36.

25. Rather than repeating what is now considered a racial slur, we will be using the word "Black." Please see Methods for a more in-depth discussion about terms.

26. To read more about the use of racial categories, please see the Methods.

27. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 10.

28. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 8.

29. Hale, *Making Whiteness*.

30. Memorandum on a Greek Study from Edwin Bjorkmon in Life History Collection, June 7, 1939. Folder 1029 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The inclusion of interviewees marked as "Cuban" in Florida is a result of the same situation as those marked as "Greek." Letter to W. T. Couch from Carita Doggitt Corse, 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. See Figure 37.

31. "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.

32. "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. See Figure 38.

33. Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 41.

34. Botkin received the following degrees: Harvard (BA, 1920); Columbia (MA 1921); University of Nebraska (PhD, 1931) as cited in Lawrence R. Rodgers and Jerrold Hirsch, *America's Folklorist: BA Botkin and American Culture* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 2.

35. Hirsch and Rodgers, *America's Folklorist*, 21.

36. Rachel C. Jackson, "Locating Oklahoma: Critical Regionalism and Transrhetorical Analysis in the Composition Classroom," *College Composition and Communication* 66, no. 2 (2014): 308.

37. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 41; Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 182.

38. "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.

39. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 184. See Figure 32..

40. Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers' Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (University of Illinois Press, 1977), 152.

41. Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 185.

42. 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. See Figure 39.

43. 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. See Figure 40.

44. Memorandum: "Program of the Federal Writers' Project for the Coming Year."

45. Shirley Moody-Turner, *Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), [link]; Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*.

46. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 64.

47. Todd Carmody, "Sterling Brown and the Dialect of New Deal Optimism," *Callaloo* 33, no. 3 (2010): 820–40.

48. Stewart, 14.

49. Stewart, 65. For more information on the role of interviewees in this process, see Thomas Soapes, "The Federal Writers' Project Slave Interviews: Useful Data or Misleading Source," *The Oral History Review* 5 (1977): 33–38.

50. Lomax was a director of the Ex-Slave Narrative Project before Botkin took over as head of the Folklore unit. John Lomax's son, Alan, and his wife, Elizabeth, also helped with the project and generally shared similar beliefs. For more information see Stewart's *Long Past Slavery*.

51. Ruth Ann Beecher, "The Strange Disappearance of Sterling A. Brown: Literature, Social Science and the Representation of Black Americans, 1930–1945." PhD thesis, Birkbeck, University of London, 2015, 134.

52. Beecher, "The Strange Disappearance of Sterling A. Brown."

53. "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. See Figure 27.

54. While only 13 life histories were marked by writers as being from "ex-slaves," some Black interviewees did find strategic ways to discuss their or their families' experiences of enslavement. Moreover, White interviewees often lamented the end of enslavement and the wealth they lost with the end of slavery. These topics can be seen in the text analysis in Layer 4.

55. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016).

56. Earl Wright, "W.E.B. Du Bois, Howard W. Odum and the Sociological Ghetto," *Sociological Spectrum* 34, no. 5 (2014): 453–68.

57. 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 (Social Science Research Council, 1939); John Dollard, *Criteria for a Life History* (Yale University Press, 1939); Loraine Gelsthorpe, "The Jack-Roller: Telling a Story?" *Theoretical Criminology* 11, no. 4 (November 2007): 515–42. doi: 10.1177/1362480607081839; Jo Goodey. "Biographical Lessons for Criminology," *Theoretical Criminology* 4, no. 4 (November 2000): 473–98. [link].

58. John Dollard, *Criteria for the Life History* (Peter Smith, 1949), 189.

59. "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. See Figure 42.

60. "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.

61. "Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People."

62. "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers' Project in the South."

63. "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers' Project in the South." See Figure 81.

64. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color.*

65. David M. Austin, "The Institutional Development of Social Work Education: The First 100 Years—And Beyond," *Journal of Social Work Education* 33, no. 3 (1997): 599–612. [link].

66. Austin, "The Institutional Development of Social Work Education,". [link].

67. Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

68. Austin, "The Institutional Development of Social Work Education," [link]. 601

69. Linda M. Shoemaker "Early Conflicts in Social Work Education," *Social Science Review* 72, no. 2 (1998).

70. Austin, "The Institutional Development of Social Work Education," [link].

71. "Memorandum Concerning Proposed Plans for Work of the Federal Writers' Project in the South."

72. Jessica Enoch, *Domestic Occupations: Spatial Rhetorics and Women's Work* (Southern Illinois University 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* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2013); David Gold and Jessica Enoch, *Women at Work: Rhetorics of Gender and Labor* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019); Sarah Hallenbeck and Michelle Smith, "Mapping Topoi in the Rhetorical Gendering of Work," *Peitho* 17, no. 2 (2015): 200.

73. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, xi.

74. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, 418; Couch, xi.

75. 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. See Figure 43.

76. 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; 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. See Figure 44.

77. 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. See Figure 45.

78. 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. See Figure 46.

79. 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. See Figure 43.

80. Richard Walser, *Bernice Kelly Harris: Storyteller of Eastern Carolina* (University of North Carolina Library, 1955), [link].

81. 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. See Figure 47.

82. Bernice Harris, *Southern Savory* (University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 184.

83. Kathleen Ryan, Nancy Sean Myers, and Rebecca Paige A. Jones, eds., *Rethinking Ethos: A Feminist Ecological Approach to Rhetoric* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2016); Enoch, *Domestic Occupations*.

84. Two interviews were with women whose race was not recorded.

85. 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. See Figure 48.

86. As quoted in Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 167.

87. "Life History of Frank Martin" written by Ida Moore, October 31, 1938, Folder 680 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern

Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; "Life History of Unknown" written by Ida Moore, October 31, 1938, Folder 651 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; "Life History of Ellie Westbrooks" written by Ida Moore, October 31, 1938, Folder 664 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [link]

88. Enoch, *Domestic Occupations*, 75.

89. " 'Pay Day" written by Virginia Stevens [radio transcript created from the Life History of Frank Martin], no date, Folder 680 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [link]

90. While Muncy writes about the professionalization of social work, the same is true here, in which White women establish their professionalization by focusing on their expertise in the home. *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform*, 1890–1935

91. 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.

92. Letter to Walter Cutter from J. R Aswell, May 6, 1939, Folder 1136 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See Figure 49.

93. Letter to Couch from McDaniel, June 20, 1939, Folder 1143 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See Figure 50.

94. Letter to Couch from McDaniel, June 20, 1939.

95. Solberg, Janine. "Taking Shorthand for Literacy: Historicizing the Literate Activity of U.S. Women in the Early Twentieth-Century Office," *Literacy in Composition Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 15, 2014): 1–28.

96. Solberg, "Taking Shorthand for Literacy," 3.

97. Harris, *Southern Savory*. 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. See Figure 80.

98. For more about the data and metadata that we used to conduct these counts, see the Methods layer.

99. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 7-8.

100. 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.

101. "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. See Figure 51.

102. 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. See Figure 52.

103. "Report on the Status of the Negro in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee," October 19, 1938.

104. 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. See Figure 53.

105. 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. 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. See Figure 54.

106. 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. See Figure 77.

107. 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. See Figure 55.

108. Letter to Samuel Tupper from W. T. Couch, July 19, 1939, Folder 1146 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See Figure 56.

109. Letter to McDaniel from W. T. Couch, July 21, 1939, Folder 1146 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See Figure 57.

110. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*, 134.

111. Stewart, 139.

112. Stewart, 142.

113. 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. See Figure 58.

114. "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. See Figure 59.

Layer 4: Rhetorical Strategies and Representation

1. "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. See Figure 60.

2. For more about the data and text analysis, see the the Methods.

3. For examples see Clifford R. Shaw and E. W. Burgess, *The Jack-Roller: A Delinquent Boy's Own Story* (Martino Fine Books, 2013); Herbert Blumer, *An Appraisal of Thomas and Znaniecki's* The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (Social Science Research Council, 1939), [link].

4. William Terry Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939), x.

5. 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. See Figure 61.

6. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, 417.

7. Couch, 147.

8. Couch, 418.

9. 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, [link]

10. "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. See Figure 27.

11. Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road*, (Princeton University Press, 1996); Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005); Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work* (New York Public Library, 1998); Robert Tausig, *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own* (University of Chicago

Press, 2011); Tobias Hecht, *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel* (Duke University Press, 2006).

12. Letter to Bernice Harris from Walter Cutter, 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. See Figure 62.

13. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, reprint ed. (Oxford University Press, 1987).

14. 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. See Figure 29.

15. 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. See Figure 63.

16. Risa Applegarth, *Rhetoric in American Anthropology: Gender, Genre, and Science* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 19.

17. 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, [link]

18. 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.

19. 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.

20. Letter to Myrtle Miles from W. T. Couch, November 12, 1938.

21. 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. See Figure 65.

22. "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. See Figure 60.

23. "Editorial Report on State Copy: North Carolina Mill Village Sketches."

24. 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 the Methods for more information.

25. 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.

26. 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.

27. Letter to George Andrews, Mary Northrop, Sidney Jones, Harriet Corley, and W. O. Saunders from Edwin Bjorkman, November 9, 1938.

28. "Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People." 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. See Figure 27.

29. Letter to Mable Montgomery from Chalmers S. Murray, November 30, 1938, Folder 1103 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See Figure 66.. Murray was not the only writer to question the ability of writers to remember such long quotes. In fact, Leonard Rapport, a writer in the North Carolina Branch, published an article questioning the validity of the life histories. Leonard Rapport, "How Valid Are the Federal Writers' Project Life Stories: An Iconoclast among the True Believers," *The Oral History Review* 7, no. 1 (1979): 6–17. See also a response to this article: Tom Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, "Replies to Leonard Rapport's 'How Valid Are the Federal Writers' Project Life Stories: An Iconoclast among the True Believers,'" *The Oral History Review* 8, no. 1 (1980): 81–89.

30. Jane Raymond Walpole, "Eye Dialect in Fictional Dialogue," *College Composition and Communication* 25, no. 2 (1974): 191–96.

31. 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. See Figure 67.

32. Joan Redding, "The Dillard Project: The Black Unit of the Louisiana Writers' Project," *Louisiana History*, 1991, 47–62.

33. Redding, "The Dillard Project," 49.

34. Oral history of Caroline Durieux by Margaret Fisher Dalrymple, March 31, 1975, Collection 4700.0013, T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection, Louisiana State University. [link]; Jason Berry, "Up From the Soul," *My New Orleans* (blog), April 1, 2014, [link].

35. Richard B. Megraw, "The Uneasiest State: Art, Culture, and Society in New Deal Louisiana, 1933–1943.(Volumes I and II).," *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*, 1990, 5077, 414–15.

36. Dennis R. Preston, "The Li'l Abner Syndrome: Written Representations of Speech," *American Speech* 60, no. 4 (1985): 328–36,cited in Sylvie Dubois and Barbara M. Horvath, "Sounding Cajun: The Rhetorical Use of Dialect in Speech and Writing," *American Speech* 77, no. 3 (2002): 264–87.

37. 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. See Figure 68.

38. Letter to Myrtle Miles from W. T. Couch, November 31, 1938.

39. Her strong style can be seen in the fact that Topic 2 is almost entirely dominated by Bernice Harris.

40. 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.

41. Life history of Joe Vaughn by Ida B. 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.

42. Life history of Joe Vaughn by Ida B. Prine, "Life in a Shrimping and Oyster Shucking Camp."

43. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*, xi.

44. Couch, ix.

45. Katharine Jocher, "The Case Method in Social Research," *Social Forces*, 1928, 203–11; George A. Lundberg, "Case Work and the Statistical Method," *Social Forces* 5 (1926): 61; George Andrew Lundberg, *Social Research: A Study in Methods of Gathering Data* (Longmans,

Green, and Co., 1942); Howard Washington Odum and Katharine Jocher, *An Introduction to Social Research* (Henry Holt And Co., 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.

46. 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. See Figure 78.

47. 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. See Figure 69.

48. "Life Histories as a Method of Revealing People."

Conclusion

1. Transcript of the 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. See Figure 70.

2. Letter to Dr. Douglas 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. For other letters, see Folders 1128–1136. See Figure 39.

3. William Terry Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939).

4. Couch, *These Are Our Lives*.

5. 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. See Figure 71.

6. "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. See Figure 72.

7. 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. See Figure 73.

8. 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. See Figure 74.

9.   "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. See Figure 51.

10. *Charlotte Observer,* May 21, 1939, Carol Green Russell. Comments of reviewers on TAOL. See Figure 72.

11. 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. See Figure 29.

12. 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. See Figure 75.

13. 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. See Figure 76.

14. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (Vintage Books, 2003).

Methods

1.   Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

2.   For more, see [link].

3.   Courtney Rivard, Taylor Arnold, Lauren Tilton, "Building Pedagogy into Project Development: Making Data Construction Visible in Digital Projects," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (2019).

4.   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."

5.   Hadley Wickham, "Tidy Data," *Journal of Statistical Software* 59, no. 10 (2014).

6.   Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein, "What Gets Counted Counts," Data Feminism, March 16, 2020, [link]. See also Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont, *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and the Digital Humanities* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

7. Jessica Marie Johnson, "Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads," *Social Text* 36, no. 4 (2018): 57–79. DOI: 10.1215/01642472-7145658. See also Amy E. Earhart and Toniesha L. Taylor, "Pedagogies of Race: Digital Humanities in the Age of Ferguson," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, 251–64 (University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Jennifer Mahoney et al. "Data Fail: Teaching Data Literacy with African Diaspora Digital Humanities," *Journal of Interactive Technology & Pedagogy*, December 10, 2020. https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/data-fail-teaching-data-literacy-with-african-diaspora-digital-humanities/; Safiya Umoja Noble, "Toward a Critical Black Digital Humanities," in Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, 25–35 (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

8. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 1994), 5

9. These are not exhaustive, focusing most on flagging a few interviews of people of Greek and Cuban descent.

10. Taylor Arnold, Emeline Blevins Alexander, Courtney Rivard, Lauren Tilton, , and Laura Wexler, "FWP Life History Project in the American South: Machine-Readable Text and Metadata (Version 1.0)," Zenodo, May 29, 2020, 10.5281/zenodo.3865765.

11. The tests ensure, for example, that all of the table keys link together and that the interviews appear to correctly match their metadata (i.e. contains the title of the interview in the text and has a reasonable number of words given the number of pages).

12. Dirk Ahlers, "Assessment of the Accuracy of GeoNames Gazetteer Data," *Proceedings of the G.I.R. Workshop*, 2013, pp. 74–81, CiteSeerX 10.1.1.722.8740.

13. For more about debates on "cleaning" data, see Katie Rawson and Trevor Muñoz, "Against Cleaning," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, eds. Lauren Klein and Matt Gold (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), [link].

14. Taylor Arnold. "A Tidy Data Model for Natural Language Processing Using cleanNLP," *The R Journal* 9, no. 2 (2017): 248–26.

15. Matthew Honnibal, Ines Montani, Sofie Van Landeghem, and Adriane Boyd, "spaCy: Industrial-strength Natural Language Processing in Python," Zenodo, 2020, 10.5281/zenodo.1212303.

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17. These should have been removed by the part of speech tags, which have a separate category for proper nouns, but errors are common

with this process, particularly when proper capitalization is not used (not uncommon in indirect quotes in this corpus).

18. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

19. L. Németh, V. Trón, P. Halácsy, A. Kornai, A. Rung, and I. Szakadát, "Leveraging the Open-Source ispell Codebase for Minority Language Analysis," *Proceedings of SALTMIL*, 2004, 56–59.

20. K. Hornik and B. Grün, "Topic Models: An R Package for Fitting Topic Models," *Journal of Statistical Software* 40, no. 13: 1–30.

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27. [link]

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29. J. A. Kimerling, S. W. Overton, and D. White, "Statistical Comparison of Map Projection Distortions within Irregular Areas," *Cartography and Geographic Information Systems* 22, no. 3 (1995): 205–21.

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Appendix A: Digital Platform

For archival purposes, this appendix contains screenshots of the digital project site hosted at https://layeredlives.org/.

Figure 19
Landing page for the project. Clicking enter opens a new window with the main project site.
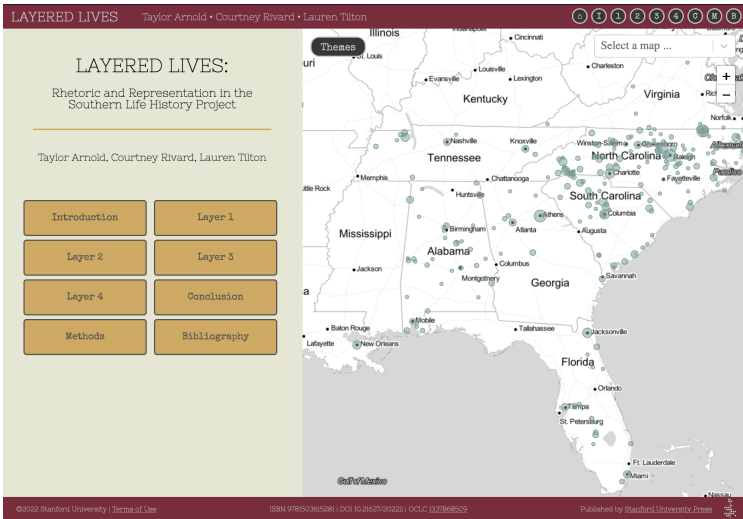
Figure 20
The project site as it appears when first entering. Buttons on the left allow for opening each layer of text.
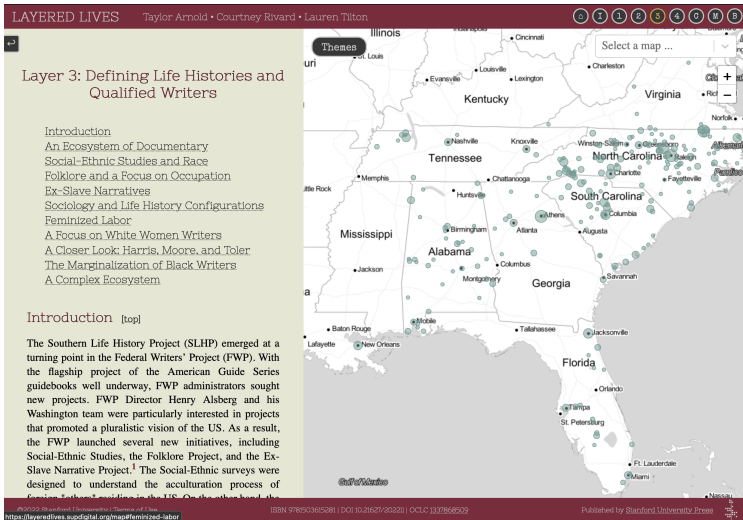
Figure 21
Example of one layer's text on the left-hand side of the screen.
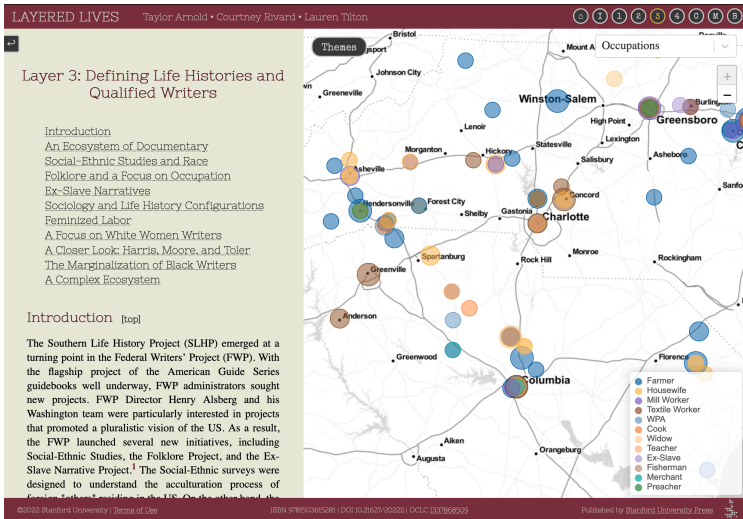
Figure 22
Example showing a different map (this one colored by occupation), zoomed into a region around Charlotte, NC.
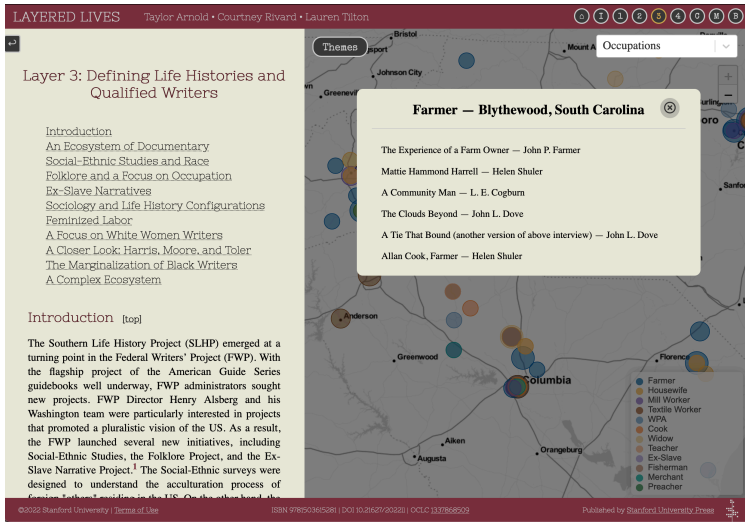
Figure 23
The result of clicking on the map showing all life histories available in a location.
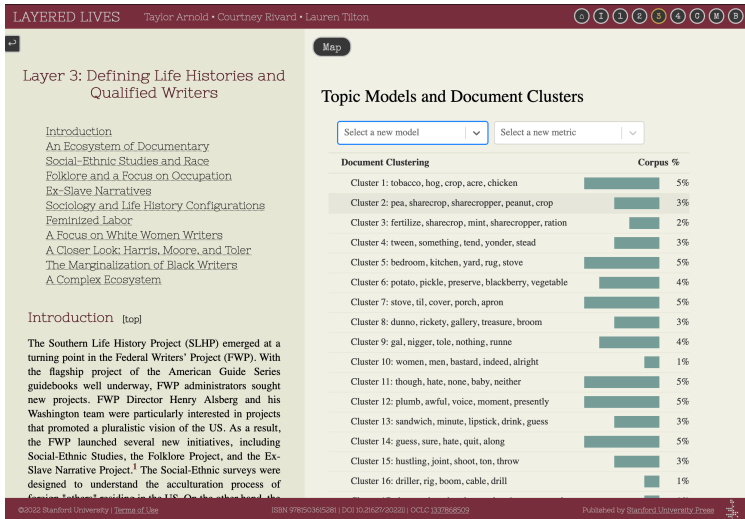
Figure 24
Example of a document clustering algorithm, showing metadata about each detected cluster.

Figure 25
Metadata about a specific document cluster, including individual life histories.

Figure 26
Clicking on an individual life history from the map or themes visualizers displays
the document as a styalized XML file.

Appendix B: Archival Documents

One of the defining features of the digital project is the inclusion of archival documents embedded within the text of the book. To illustrate as best as possible in this printed format, the archival documents are included in the appendix here.

LIFE HISTORIES AS A METHOD OF REVEALING PEOPLE

1.

The method of writing life histories from the viewpoint of the person concerned is a new device. 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.

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 partic- ular 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. Life his- tories are not interested in an abstract man, member of the group of tenant farmers, which group has special and pressing problems. But life histories are concerned with John Smith, a tenant farmer who not only has the problems of the group of tenant farmers, but in addition breathes, loves, hates, eats, sleeps, has aspirations, opinions, attitudes and beliefs. Nor is this method interested primarily in creating literature, in the sense of allowing writers to strive for a calculated literary effect.

As with sociology, so it is with even the best case histories. They do not do the job contemplated by life histories. First, they are technically written for a technical audience. Secondly, of necessity much that would be included in a life history as told by a person would be discarded by the

Figure 27
Folder 1165 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

U. N. C. PRESS

April 22, 1938

Mr. Henry G. Alsberg
Federal Writers' Project
8th and G Streets
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Alsberg:

I have just this morning sent you a letter expressing
our opinion of the importance of making available in the South more
books on local subjects, especially books on social and economic
subjects, on nature study, and on conservation, written on elementary
and high school levels.

I wish now to list a number of other studies which I think
ought to be made.

1. Life Histories of Tenant Farmers and Their Families.
Very little information on this subject is available. The kind of
material I have in mind is best illustrated by the case histories
on page 260 ff of Human Factors in Cotton Culture by Rupert B. Vance.
I left a copy of this work with you when I was in Washington.
Material of this kind seems to me of the greatest importance. It
ought to be collected from every Southern state, from all types
of tenants, sharecroppers, share renters, and renters, and ought
to include all the most important types of farming. It is possible
that other government agencies, such as the Farm Security Administra-
tion could assist in the collection of this material. A sample
could be made up of the kind of material wanted along with general
questions. Such a sample if broadcast and followed up should bring
in interesting material. It would, of course, be necessary to select
and edit in order to make a book.

There probably would be no difficulty in collecting this
material throughout most of the South. In those regions where croppers
have organized, and where tension exists between owners and tenants,
some obstacles might arise, but I believe these obstacles could be
overcome by tactful procedure.

2. Life Histories of Farmer Owners and Their Families.
There is not as much interest in this subject at present, but the
collection of material on it is just as important as on tenants.

3. Life Histories of Mill Village Workers and Their Families.
In company owned villages it might prove very difficult to collect
satisfactory material on this subject. This is a subject on which
more skill and experience in collection of material would be required.

Figure 28
Folder 1083 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 29
Folder 1098 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

- 3 -

9. (A) **Social-Ethnic Studies:** A number of Social-Ethnic studies are already under way. These studies deal with the life of ethnic groups in various communities, including their cultural backgrounds and activities. A few of these studies have already been published and a number of others are in progress. Dr. M. W. Royse, a specialist in this field, formerly of Harvard University, has been setting up these projects in a number of states, and will eventually visit most of the states to initiate the work. A Manual of Social-Ethnic Studies, covering these projects, has already been issued.

(B) **Folklore Studies:** The Folklore Studies have already been initiated in a number of states. They are under the direction of Dr. B. A. Botkin, a member of the faculty of the University of Oklahoma. Dr. Botkin has already visited many of the Eastern states and will eventually visit the balance of the states to organize the work. These studies will result in a number of books covering localities in the states, and eventually the material so collected will be combined in several national volumes. Instructions for the carrying on of these projects, A Manual of Folklore Studies, have already been issued. National Folklore: Dr. Botkin is now compiling a preliminary publication of folklore material which we have been collecting during the past two years. He will want further contributions to this book from the state projects.

10. **Negro Lore:** In addition to the ethnic group and folklore studies, there will be a number of projects carried on covering Negro life throughout the country, Negro folklore, etc. A history of the Negro in Virginia will shortly go to the publisher. Other books on the Negro are being compiled in Louisiana, Florida, New York City, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and other places with large Negro population.

A national book covering the high-lights of Negro history and activities is being compiled under the direction of Professor Sterling Brown of Howard University. The material for this book is contributed from our projects all over the country.

We are also going to continue the collection of stories of ex-slaves. About 2,500 of these have already been collected. Eventually, these ex-slave stories will be compiled, classified and used for a publication containing a critical analysis of the material. Dr. Botkin and Professor Sterling Brown will be in charge of this collection.

11. **Life Histories:** In the southern states a project is already under way for the collection of a large number of life histories for the various occupational groups, including southern tenant farmers, mill workers, lumbermen, miners, fishermen, persons in service trades, and families and community life. In these stories the emphasis will be on case histories for the purpose of presenting potentials of human life.

Figure 30
Folder 1093 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Social-Ethnic 9

and cultural conditions are here tied up with conditions of work. In connection with the locality study it should be observed that an important ethnic group will be found in both rural and industrial regions, calling, perhaps, for separate treatment.

C. Living Conditions

This phase of the study is closely tied up with work and wage. It includes such items as income, housing, food, health, and sanitation.

Note: Care should be taken not to interpret a low standard of living as necessarily a carry-over from the Old Country, instead of the product of existing conditions.

D. Social and Cultural Life

The groups are studied for their activities, interests and loyalties, including social, fraternal, and religious organizations, folk culture, press, and arts.

Note: Care should be taken not to overstress the separateness and peculiarities of a group. The aim should be to show how the group functions in the life of the community, through contact; to what extent it varies from the general pattern, through survival of Old World traits; and how it contributes to cultural diversity, through its effect on the community. Even in semi-segregated colonies in larger cities, immigrants (including the "old folks") are in contact with the larger community life, at work, on the streets, in shops, at the movies, etc., changing the pattern as well as being changed.

Figure 31
Folder 1111 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Social-Ethnic 3

II.   Correlation with the Folklore Studies

As a major part of its immediate program, the Federal Writers' Project is planning two series of cultural studies - the social-ethnic studies and the folklore studies.

In both the social-ethnic and the folklore studies the approach is functional. The studies will be organized around nationality groups, communities, and regions. The emphasis is on ways of living and cultural diversity with special reference to population distribution and change.

In correlating the work of the two series, the following connections and distinctions should be observed:

1. 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.

2. The social-ethnic studies involve special and separate treatments of nationality groups; the folklore studies fit native and imported traditions into the diversified American pattern.

3. Supervisors in the two series should be encouraged to familiarize themselves with the methods and materials of both the social-ethnic and the folklore studies, since in many cases the work will be carried on by the same staff.

4. The preparation of both series calls for:

a. The gathering of field data, including selected interviews, personal histories, and documentary material:

Figure 32
Folder 1111 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
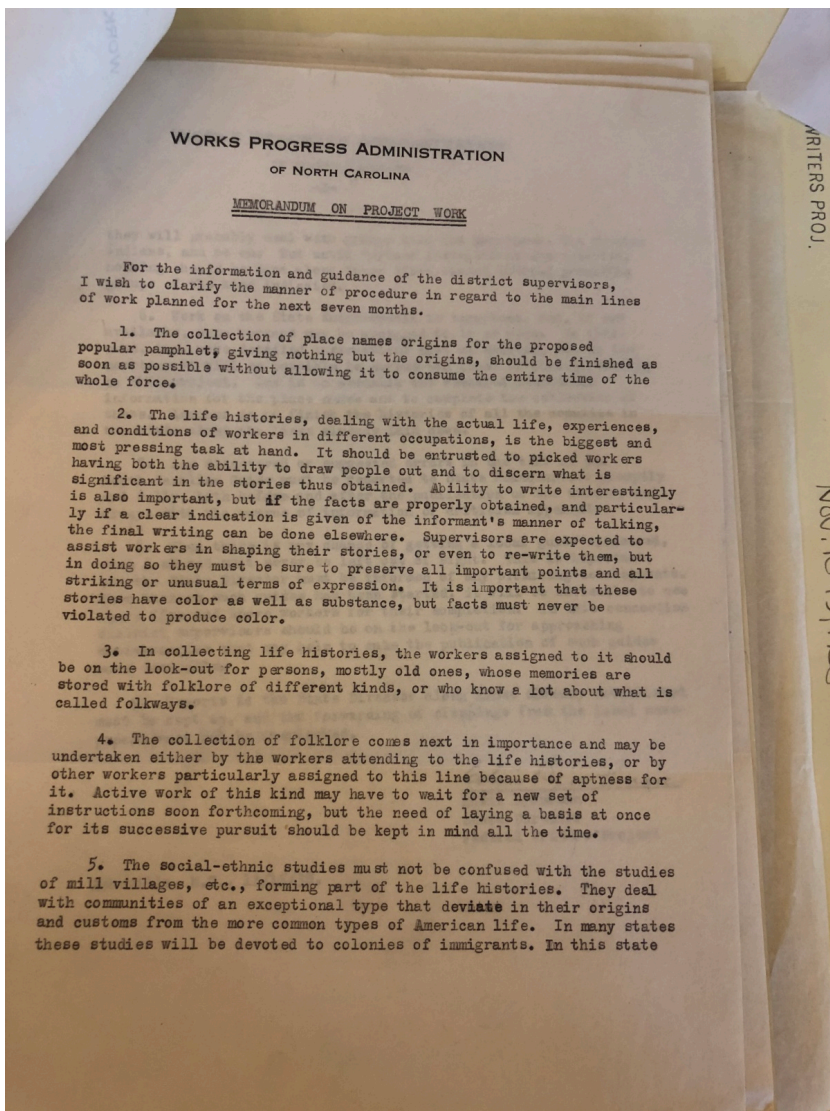
Figure 33
Folder 1101 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
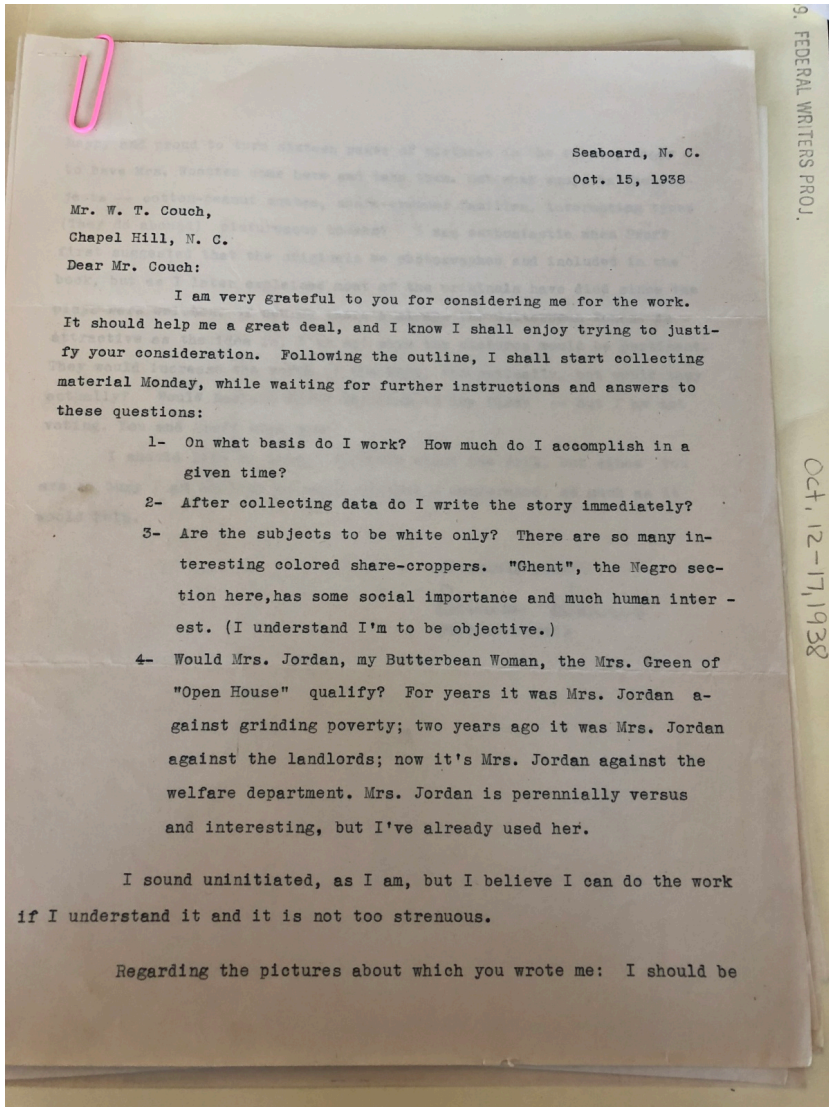
Figure 34
Folder 1095 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Federal Writers' Project
Chapel Hill, N. C.
October 20, 1938

Mrs. Bernice Kelly Harris
Seaboard, N. C.

Dear Mrs. Harris:

You are supposed to work a minimum of 70 hours during each pay period, and there are two pay periods in each month. I am sending you herewith a number of blanks and one blank filled out to show the time you are supposed to work. If you will sign all these blanks and return them to us we will fill them in for you, then it will be necessary only for you to inform us in case you are unable to work full time.

Frankly, I am not so much concerned about the time you work as about the material you turn in to us. You should be able to send in as many as a couple of life histories a week, the two totalling between 3,500 and 6,000 words. I find it impossible to say exactly how much I expect of you because it takes longer to do some jobs than to do others, and some are obviously worth more time than others. All I can do is tell you as well as I can what we are trying to do and then hope that you will be sufficiently interested to forget about time and do some real work. This is what I am fairly certain you will do.

You may use your own judgment 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 judgment. 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.

You should collect stories about both whites and Negroes. Pay no attention whatever to racial lines in collecting your material, except that in stories about Negroes it should be made clear that the subjects are Negroes.

There is no reason whatever for your not using Mrs. Jordan. On the contrary, the fact that you have known some person for a long period of time is a good reason for your using that person:

Figure 35
Folder 1096 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

January 5, 1939

MEMORANDUM

TO: ALL STATE DIRECTORS, FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT

FROM: WALTER CUTTER, ASSISTANT REGIONAL DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: HEADING TO BE PLACED ON ALL LIFE HISTORIES

To assist the Regional Office, it is requested that here-
after the following heading be placed on all stories:

1. Date of first writing   January 4, 1939

2. Name of person or per-   John Doe (white)(Negro)
   sons or family, etc.,   or other
   interviewed. In par-
   enthesis behind name
   give subject's race.

3. Address   1214 Inagura Street

4. Place   Bonaventura, N.C.

5. Occupation or other   (Carpenter)(Textile worker)
   status of subject, such   (Tenant farmer)(retired)
   as ----   (Railroad man) (widow)

   (In other words, give some
    clue from the interview as
    to the group in which you
    would place the person.)

6. Name of writer   Mary Spinoza, writer

7. Name of reviser, if story   Bert Aspinwall, reviser
   is revised before coming
   to Regional Office.

Use of this standard heading will facilitate the handl-
ing of stories.

Figure 36
Folder 1112 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 37
Folder 1108 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

NOTES ON THE CONFERENCE OF DR. B. A. BOTKIN WITH THE FLORIDA STAFF, DECEMBER 1, 1938.

ATTENTION STATE OFFICE

1. There will be a tour of recording equipment out of Washington. Schedules should be arranged to insure a successful tour in Florida.

2. Consultants should be involved wherever possible.

3. If an unusual ceremony, festival, etc. is scheduled, request recording equipment from Washington, giving detailed analysis of event and its significance. Also itinerary and estimated expense.

4. Contemporary street life and scenes are desired, both recorded and pictorial.

5. It is preferred that Negro workers be assigned to collect Negro folklore.

6. Give attention to neglected groups.

7. No folklore material is to be edited. All field copy should be sent directly to Washington on forms A,B,C,D, of the instruction manual. There should be little, if any, effort made to interpret or appraise folklore in a scientific or any other fashion. Science will be applied in Washington.

8. Art project will illustrate folk art.

9. Folklore is definitely of the people, by the people, and should be made available for the people. Government agencies are currently best adapted to make the lore available.

10. Folk Stuff should be: (the ten stories)
Interesting, Vital, Contemporary. Regional. Occupational.
Racial. Illustrative (of a group).

11. Excellent examples of folklore essays in Indiana and Tennessee State Guides. The attitude of the Negro section of the Mississippi folklore essay is objectionable.

12. Speed in collecting lore is important; particularly in event program is discontinued. Good showing might perpetuate collection on private basis or otherwise.

13. The Learned Society is urging cooperation between scholars (professors etc.) and governmental agencies.

Figure 38
Folder 1104 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 39
Folder 1098 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

3709. FEDERAL WRITERS PROJ.

Oct. 29 - Nov. 1, 1938

Mrs. Venable-2-

Try to interview workers who may be considered typical, such as a man who has packed up his family and belongings and come 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 organization; an opponent of unions; a leader among women workers; a worker who is locked on as a spokesman for the employer point of view; local persons who now have their first industrial job. The name of the person interviewed may be withheld.

Each first page of your case report should carry the following heading (I am taking a hypothetical case as an example):

Social-Ethnic Studies by the Federal Writers' Project

RACE _____ White _____

SEX _____ Female _____

NATIONALITY: American FATHER's: Italian MOTHER's: French

INDUSTRIAL CLASSIFICATION: _____ Cotton Mill _____

OCCUPATION _____ Weaver _____

AGE _____ 35 _____

Perhaps other questions more pertinent than those I have suggested may occur to you. These, of course, should be included. Then should follow in your own words the answers to the various questions I have suggested that you ask. Here is a chance for you to write a concise, informational, and interesting narrative. At the conclusion of your sketch, give your description and an estimate of the person you are interviewing. Your report should not exceed 500 words.

Sincerely yours,

Eudora Ramsay Richardson
State Director

ERR:d

Figure 40
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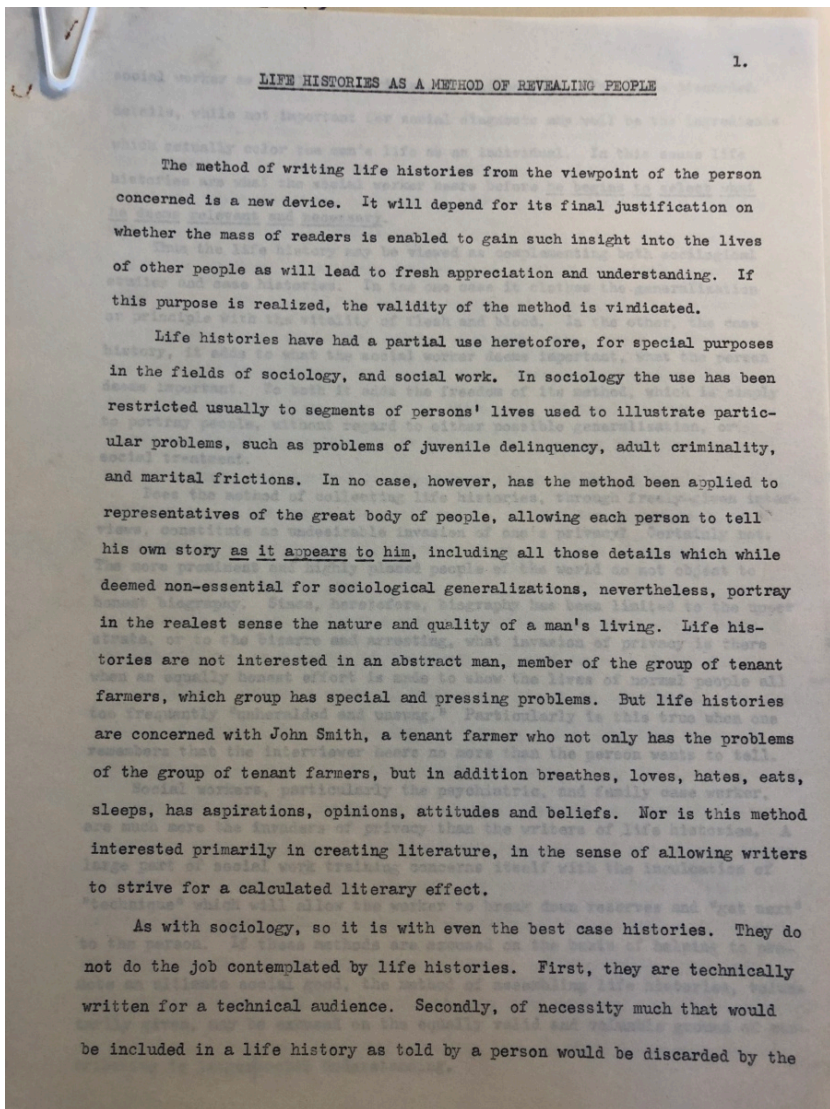
Figure 41
Folder 1093 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

July 11, 1938

MEMORANDUM CONCERNING PROPOSED PLANS FOR WORK OF THE FEDERAL
WRITERS' PROJECT IN THE SOUTH:

1. Stories of Tenant Farmers and Their Families. Very little trustworthy material on this subject is available. The kind of story that can be collected is best illustrated by the case history on page 260 ff. of Human Factors in Cotton Culture by Rupert B. Vance. This case history was written by Ben Dixon McNeill and first published in the News and Observer, daily newspaper of Raleigh, from which it was taken by Mr. Vance. Mr. McNeill has had no technical sociological training and had no sociological supervision when he wrote his case history. It was written purely as a newspaper job, but its value has been recognized for sociological as well as newspaper purposes.

This case is cited because of the possible objection that only sociologists can get case histories that are worth getting. The fact is that when sociologists get such material they generally treat their subjects as abstractions, and while an enormous amount of statistical material is available on tenants, there are not available at the present time in print anywhere as many as one-half dozen accurate case histories of actual tenant farmers.

This kind of material needs only to be mentioned in order for its importance to be realized. The fact that it has not been collected means that the existing scholarly disciplines which might engage in the collection of such material have had their attention directed elsewhere; and, in fact, their present attitude toward their subject matter and their techniques are such as to preclude their conceiving of such work as is described here or their doing the work satisfactorily after it has been described.

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 in order to assure the greatest possible accuracy in the histories that are collected.

Material of the kind suggested here ought to be collected from every Southern state, from all types of tenants, from casual farm laborers, sharecroppers, share renters, and renters, and ought to include all the more important types of farming. The Director of the Farm Security Administration in this region has been consulted and has offered to make available the resources of his office and personnel in so far as possible. The assistance of other agencies can be secured as work goes on.

Figure 42
Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
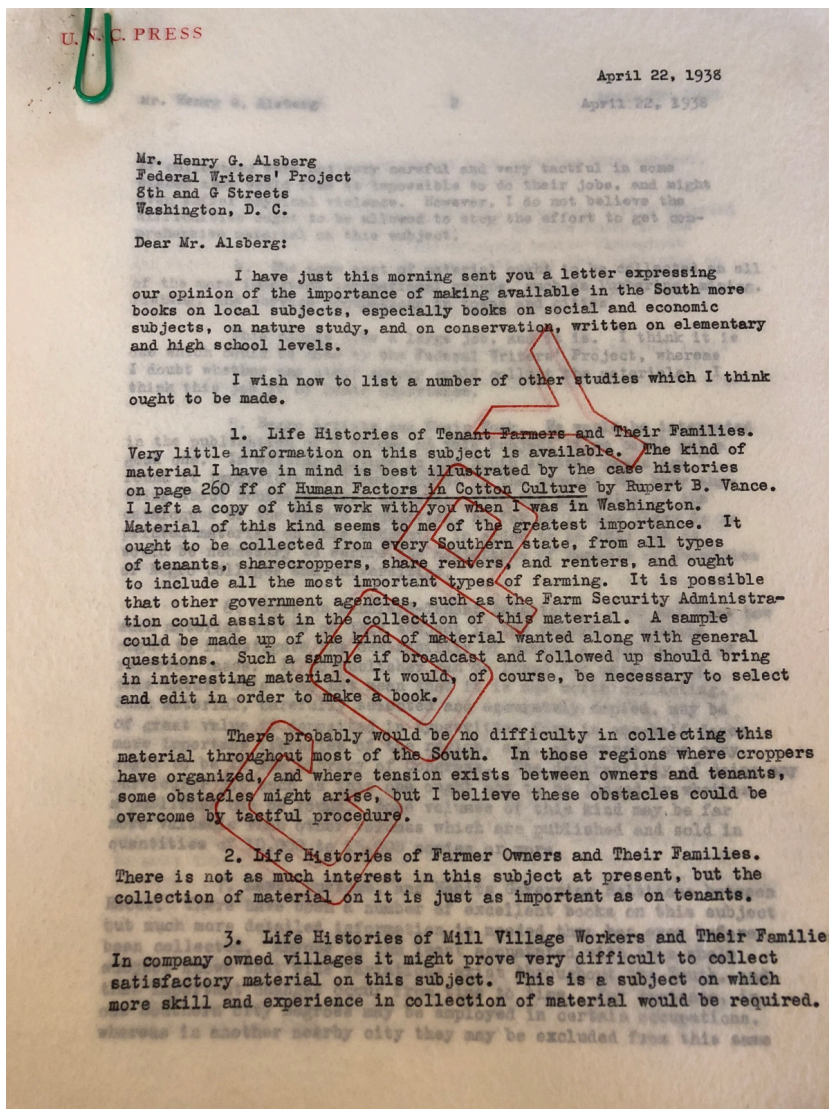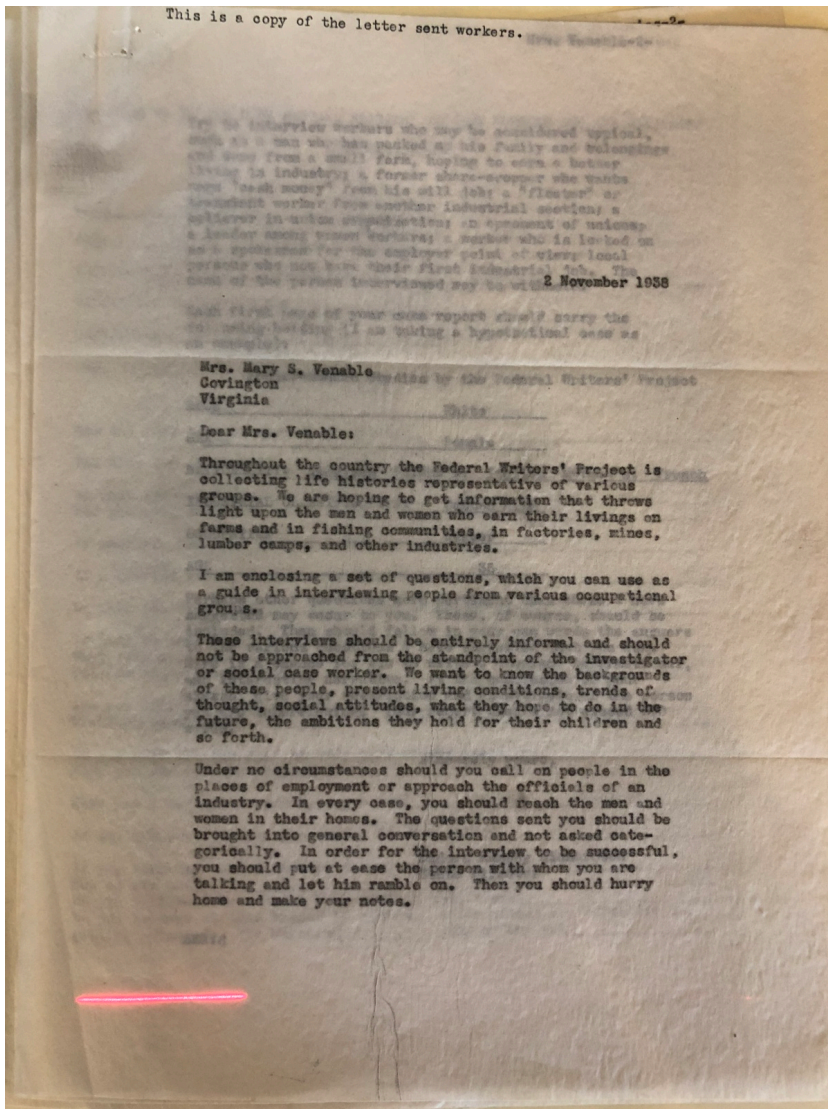
Figure 43
Folder 1098 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
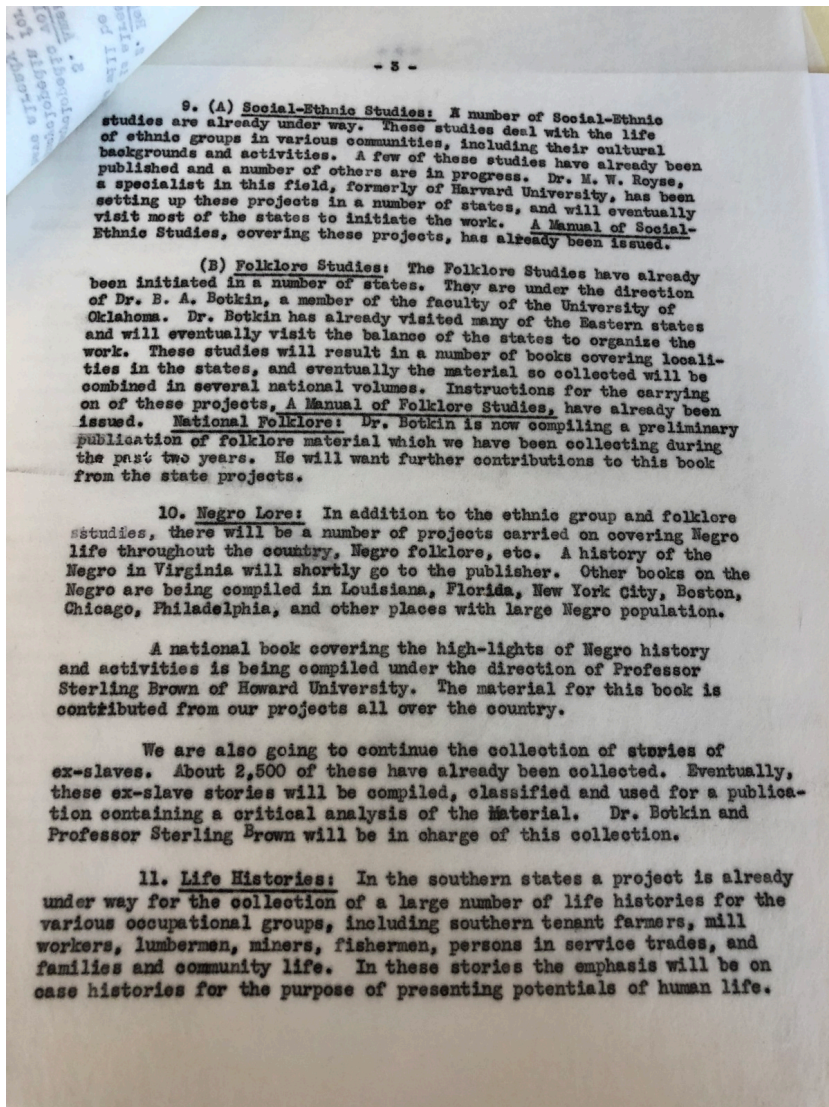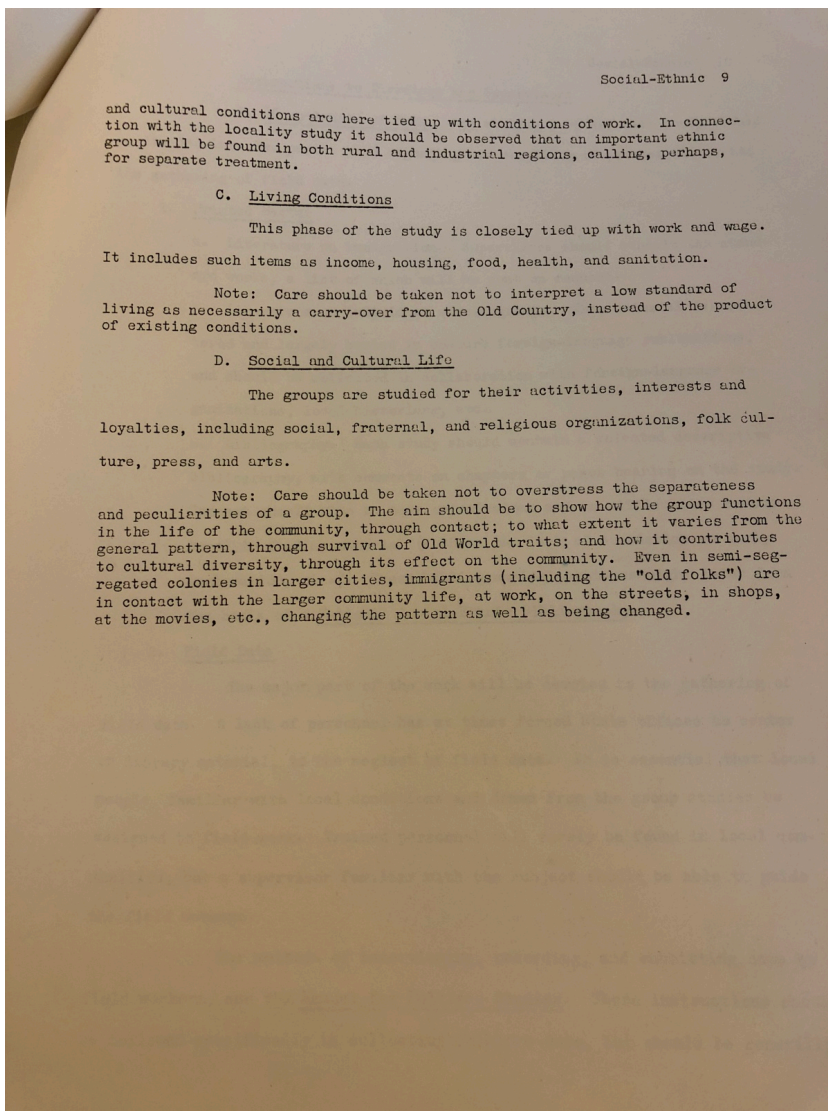
Figure 44
Folder 1099 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 45
Folder 1108 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 46
Folder 1092 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 47
Folder 1095 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 48
Folder 1088 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 49
Folder 1136 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

p. 2.
Mr. W. T. Couch

Since that time we have had Nellie Gray Toler working
on stories for such a book. We have already received manuscripts
representing every phase of syphilis and gonorrhea and I am
convinced from this material that we can produce a book of
great significance. If you still hold your opinion at that
time of such a book please do not make any plans to use Bessie
Mai otherwise. As soon as get enough of the other work out
of the way we will revise several of these stories for you
to see. The story of Dr. John Atkins, the veternarian, which
is already in your office, will also be used in this collection.
We have got additional information which definitely places
him in this book as an advanced paretic.
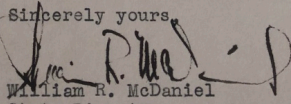
We have also found in Henry County a community we con-
sider a perfect spot for the DEATH OF THE SOIL book Mr. Aswell
and I have been planning, either for ourselves or for the
project, for some time. I believe he is today writing you a
letter specifically about that book, so I will not duplicate
the information here.

I want to repeat to you really how valuable to this
project Nellie Gray Toler and Ruth Clark have been. Nellie
Gray Toler, though she is no writer, is no doubt our most
valuable field worker. She is able and willing to do efficient-
ly anything we ask. She has a good understanding of the work
now and will be even better than she has been in the past.

Miss Clark's greatest attribute is that she is one of
the people. She shares their views, religion and mode of
living, and through that gets into her stories the essence
of their community life.

As soon as the pictures I made have been developed I
will send some of them to you and discuss further the matter
of illustrations of Liberty 4. Eliot Elisofon, the LIFE
photographer, is extremely eager to spend a month in that
community, photographing the people for the book. He says
that it is one of the best ideas he has ever run upon and
is sincerely interested in it. He has written me again
recently about the possibility of his photographing the com-
munity. I don't know what arrangements can be made, but as
soon as I have time to get some of the business piled on my
desk out of the way, I want to discuss it further with you.

Sincerely yours,

William R. McDaniel
State Director
Federal Writers' Project

WRMcD:F
cc: Mrs. Luck

Figure 50
Folder 1143 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

October 19, 1938

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mr. Couch

FROM: Office on Negro Affairs

Subject: Report on the status of the Negro in Alabama,
         Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South
         Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee.

ALABAMA

According to the State Director of Alabama, there has been great diffi-
culty in finding Negroes in Alabama eligible for positions on the
Federal Writers' Project. She states "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." Finding it impracticable to get
an essay on the Negro in Alabama completed by various suggested consul-
tants at Tuskegee, the Director assigned one of her best workers to do
the essay. This essay was not satisfactory even as late as April, 1937.
With the exception of city tours, this office has not received any copy
from that State. The Negro was not adequately treated in these city
tours. The Washington office, on July 23, 1938, suggested the develop-
ment of a small project at Tuskegee Institute. Again the Director of
Alabama Writers' Project was confronted with the "fruitless effort to
find certified Negroes in Macon County" capable of performing this type
of work, though two vacancies remained on "the additional quota of ten
allowed in the new set-up." On October 4, 1938, Miss Miles informed
the Washington office that her efforts to secure a "Negro worker at
Tuskegee Institute are at last producing results" and she has requested
that the Project Division assign this person to work as speedily as
possible.

FLORIDA

In our last report from the Florida Director she stated "we were
authorized to employ ten Negroes at the start of the Negro Writers' Unit....
A reduction in quota forced us to cut the staff to eight and further re-
duction...compelled us to limit the Negro unit to three persons." This
State submitted an excellent essay, "Negroes in Florida," in 1937. We

Figure 51
Folder 1096 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

CC Mr. W. T. Couch
    Regional Director
    Chapel Hill, N. C.

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
OF NORTH CAROLINA

State Headquarters
Federal Writers' Project
Asheville, N.C.
December 29, 1938

Mr. W. T. Couch
Regional Diredtor
Federal Writers' Project
N. C. University Press

Subject: Employment of Negroes

Dear Mr. Couch:

Replying to your memorandum of December 21:

At the present time no negro is employed on the Federal Writers' Project in this state. As far as I can figure out at this time, the total number of negroes connected with the project at one time or another during the last three years does not exceed six. Repeated 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. Appeals to negro leaders for suggestions of more suitable persons have without any exceptions resulted only in the naming of persons not on relief. 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.

Sincerely yours,

Edwin Bjorkman
Edwin Bjorkman
State Director
Federal Writers' Project

EB/nk
c: Mr. Alsberg
   Mrs. Campbell

Figure 52
Folder 1109 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
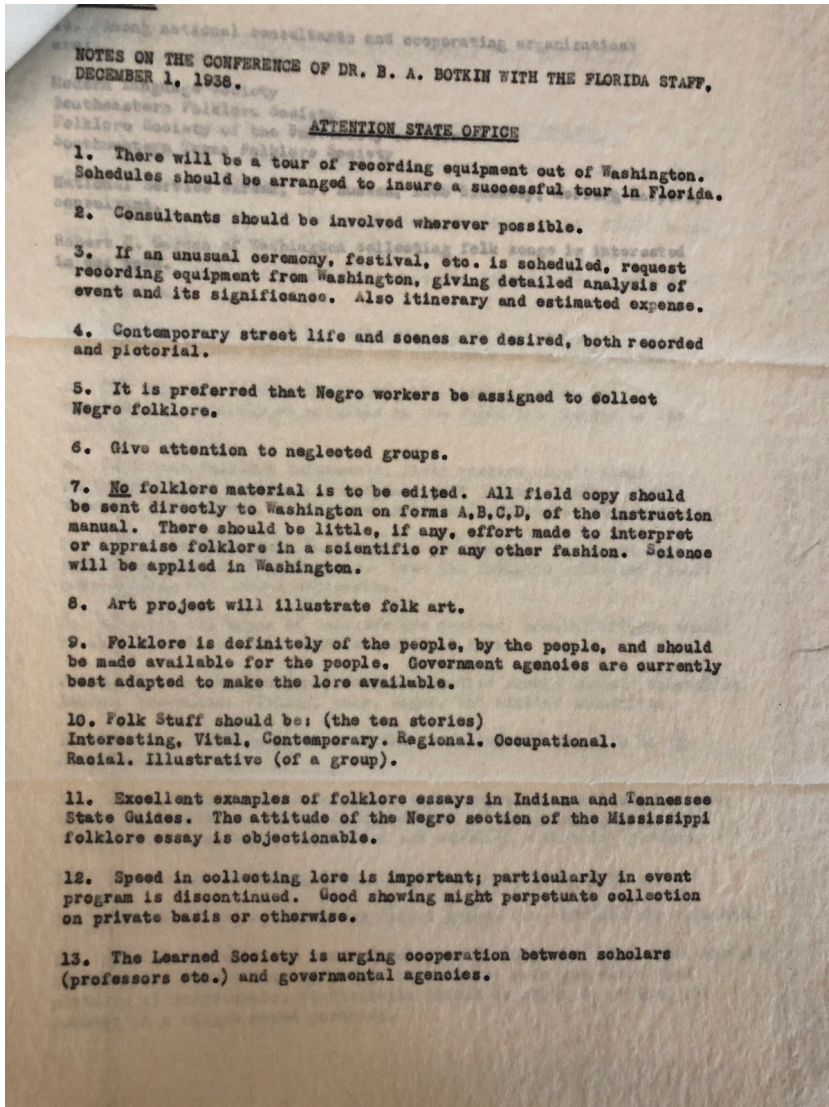
Federal Writers' Project,
Chapel Hill, N.C.
January 25, 1939

Mr. Henry G. Alsberg, Director,
Federal Writers' Project,
The Ouray Building,
8th & G Sts., NW,
Washington, D.C.

                                    Subject: Employment of Neg-
                                    roes on State Staffs

Dear Mr. Alsberg:

        Since your letter of December 16th, 1938, I have not
had time to do more than collect the information which I sent to you
the early part of this month.

        On November 11th, in reply to a letter from Mrs. Irma
Neal Henry I asked her to submit to me the names of Negroes in North
Carolina who would be qualified for employment on the Writers' Project
in this State. I have received letters of January 12th and 18th from
Mrs. Henry, giving the names of three persons, one of whom is given
as having her permanent address in New York City. I asked Mrs. Henry
to ask Negroes who wish to apply for employment on the Writers' Pro-
ject to give me statements of their experience and samples of their
writing. I can tell whether a person is eligible for employment by
reading samples of what he has written.

        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 staffs. I
have not recommended or approved anyone for any non-relief position
without first having definite evidence in the form of printed or man-
uscript 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 Negroes 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 per-
sons that I think have exceptional talent. Nothing would delight me
more than to discover a Negro with exceptional writing talent, legally

Figure 53
Folder 1118 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
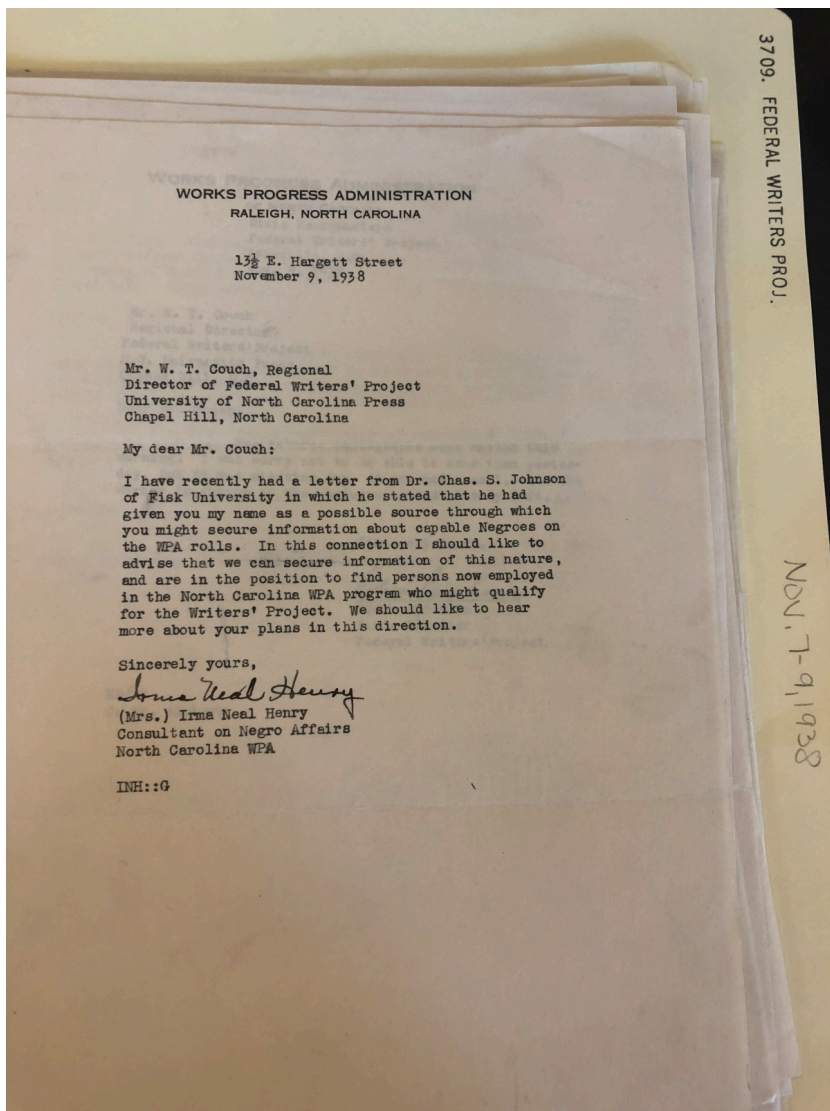
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

13½ E. Hargett Street
November 9, 1938

Mr. W. T. Couch, Regional
Director of Federal Writers' Project
University of North Carolina Press
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

My dear Mr. Couch:

I have recently had a letter from Dr. Chas. S. Johnson
of Fisk University in which he stated that he had
given you my name as a possible source through which
you might secure information about capable Negroes on
the WPA rolls. In this connection I should like to
advise that we can secure information of this nature,
and are in the position to find persons now employed
in the North Carolina WPA program who might qualify
for the Writers' Project. We should like to hear
more about your plans in this direction.

Sincerely yours,

Irma Neal Henry

(Mrs.) Irma Neal Henry
Consultant on Negro Affairs
North Carolina WPA

INH::G

Figure 54
Folder 1100 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
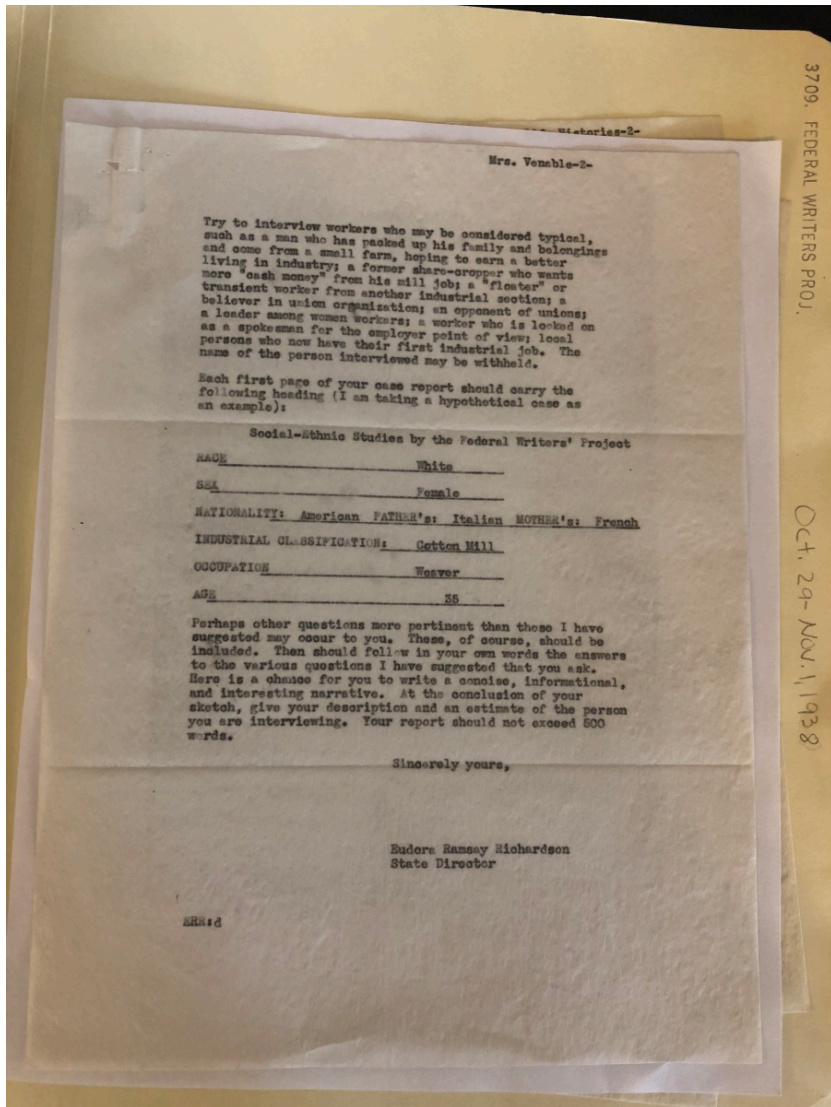
Federal Writers' Project
Chapel Hill, N.C.
January 31, 1939

Mr. W. Edward Farrison,
330 West Bragg Street,
Greensboro, N.C.

Dear Mr. Farrison:

I am very glad to have your letter of January
30th concerning the Federal Writers' Project in North Carolina
and the Southeastern states.

There are a number of jobs which I think ought
to be done and in connection with which I am sure you could be
very useful, but all indications at present are that the work
of the Federal Writers' Project will have to be contracted rath-
er than expanded.

We have had to secure the assistance of many per-
sons on a voluntary, non-salary basis. Unless more funds are
made available I do not see any chance to increase the salaried
staff and the prospects very definitely are for decreases.

I should be glad to see you at my office on Sat-
urday, afternoon, February 4th. It will be convenient for you to
come at any time between 2:30 and 3:00.

I shall be much interested in any proposals you
may have for work that Negroes might do on the Writers' Project
in North Carolina or in any other states in this region.

Sincerely yours,

William T. Couch,
Regional Director,
Federal Writers' Project

WTC/cc

Figure 55
Folder 1119 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
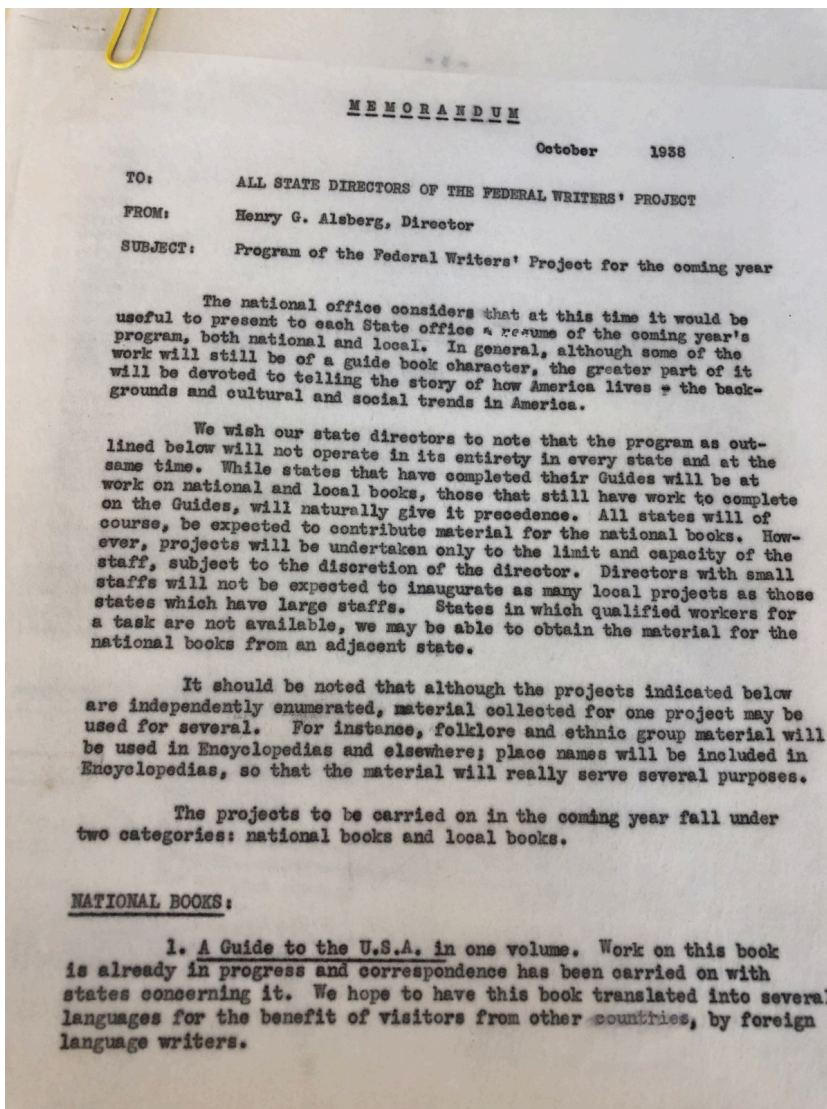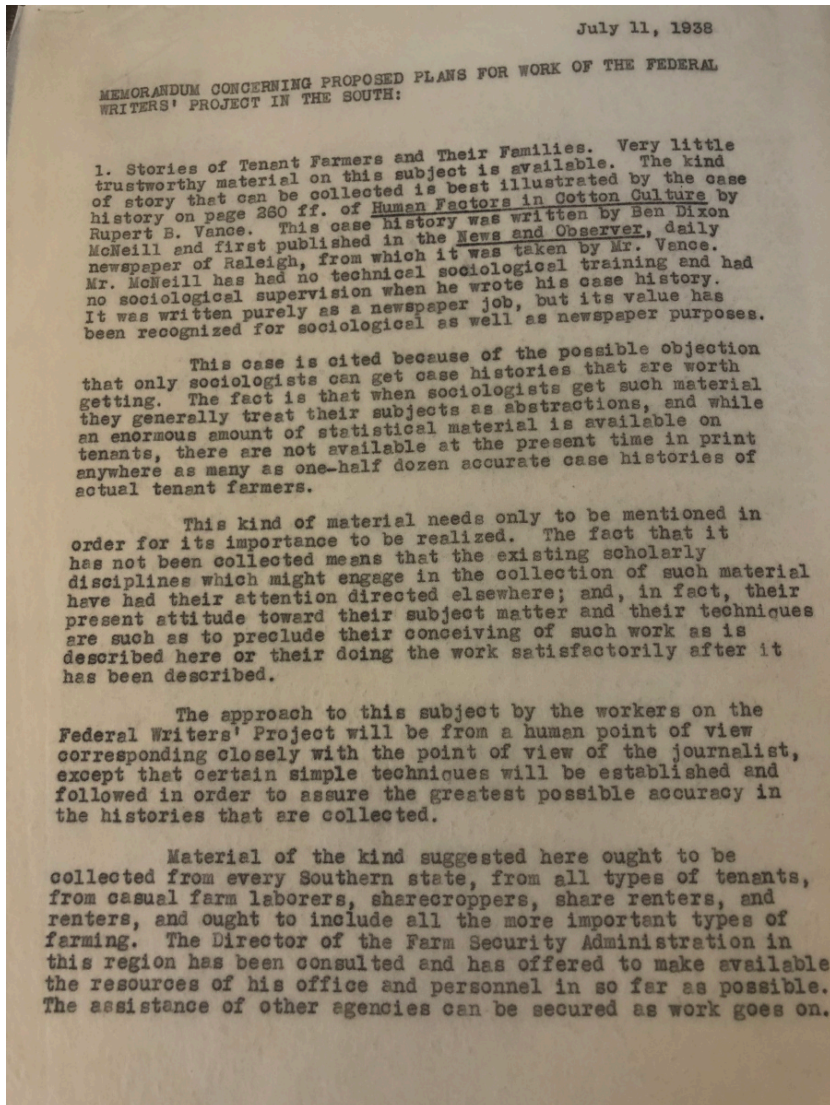Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

Federal Writers' Project,
Chapel Hill, N.C.
July 19, 1939

Mr. Samuel Y. Tupper, Jr., Dir.,
Federal Writers' Project,
605 Grand Theatre Bldg.,
Atlanta, Georgia.

Dear Mr. Tupper:

Mr. Cutter resigned as of July 12th and I am therefore
having to reply to your letter of July 18th to him.

We have found it very difficult to get good stories writ-
ten by Negroes about Negroes.

The difficulty seems to me that educated Negroes wish to
make themselves and their race appear to good advantage and they think
this can be done by talking in stilted language about things of no in-
terest or importance. I am not sure this is the trouble and I would
like to have more information before trying to reach any conclusions.

In Tennessee efforts have been made to get stories writ-
ten by Negroes and the same difficulties were faced that you are en-
countering. I think these difficulties were partially overcome, but
to the best of my knowledge we have not secured any good stories of
Negroes written by Negroes.

I would suggest that you and Mr. Russell try to tell Miss
Tonsill what is wrong with her material and then let her go ahead and
write two or three additional stories. Meantime, I am getting from
Tennessee a statement of their experience there.

Mr. Cutter's resignation has thrown a rather heavy bur-
den on me, but I hope to be able to catch up within the next week or
so.

Sincerely yours,

William T. Couch,
Regional Director,
Federal Writers' Project

WTC/cc

cc: Mr. Alsberg - Mrs. Ralston

Figure 56
Folder 1146 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
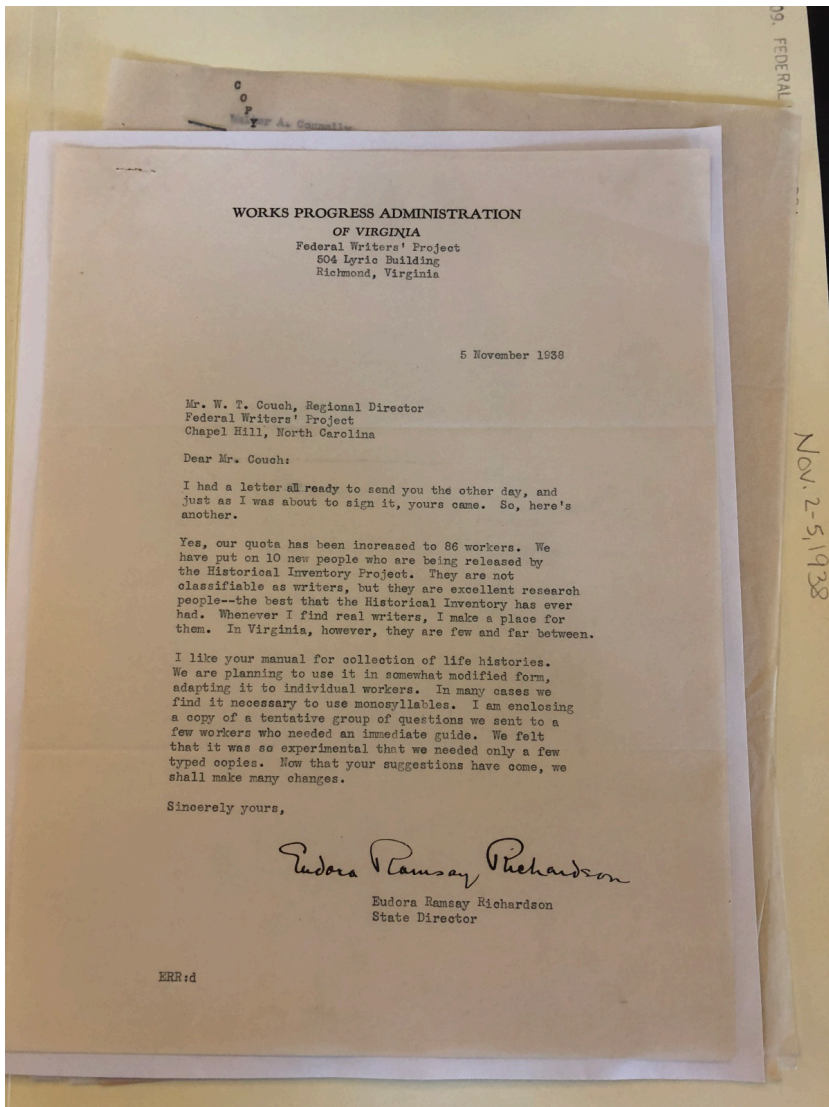
Federal Writers' Project,
Chapel Hill, N.C.
July 21, 1939

Mr. Wm. R. McDaniel, Director,
Federal Writers' Project,
414 Exchange Building,
Nashville, Tennessee.

Dear Mr. McDaniel:

If I remember correctly, you had some Negroes em-
ployed and working on the job of getting life histories.

Will you please let me have a detailed account of
your experience with the Negro writers of life histories.

If there were any general criticisms of the stories
submitted by these writers I wish you would please state what these
criticisms were and what efforts you made to have them corrected. I
wish you would also give your opinion on how much success you achieved
in getting your criticisms understood and taken care of in later work.

I wish to get this information from you in order to
compare the experience you have had in Tennessee with Negro writers
with experiences in other states.

Sincerely yours,

William T. Couch,
Regional Director,
Federal Writers' Project

WTC/cc

cc: Mr. Alsberg
Mrs. Ralston

Figure 57
Folder 1146 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
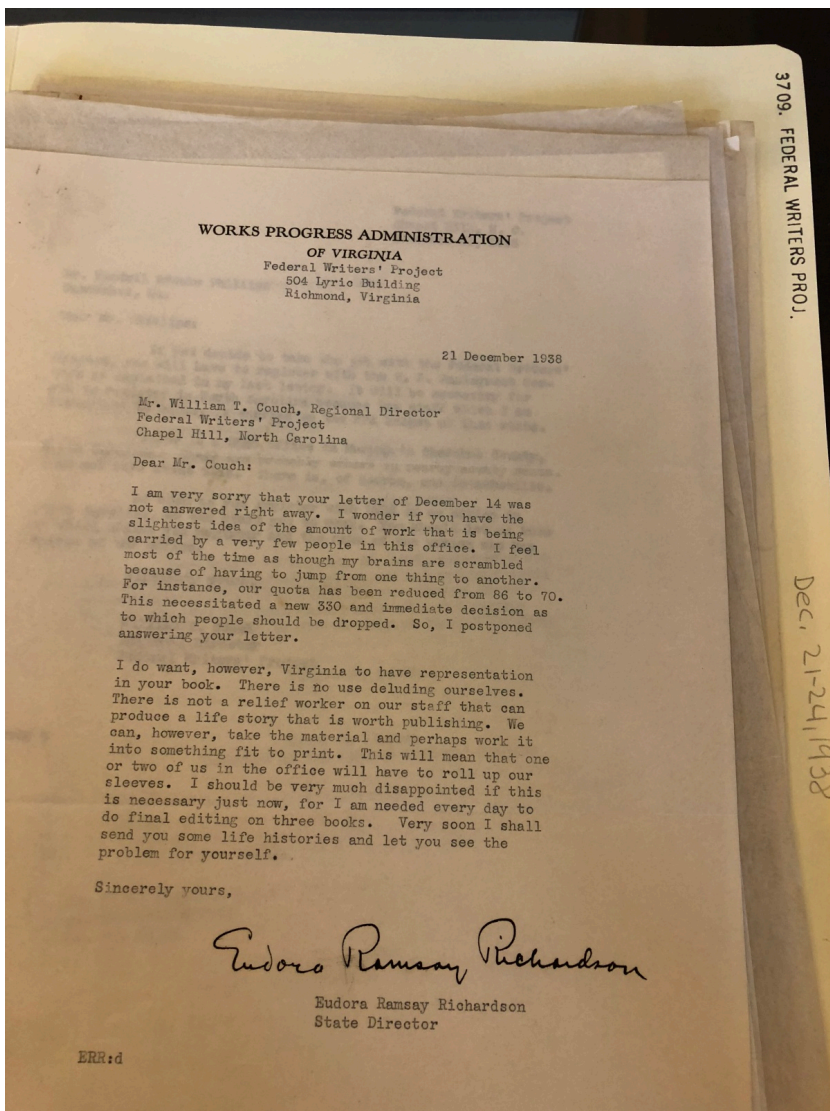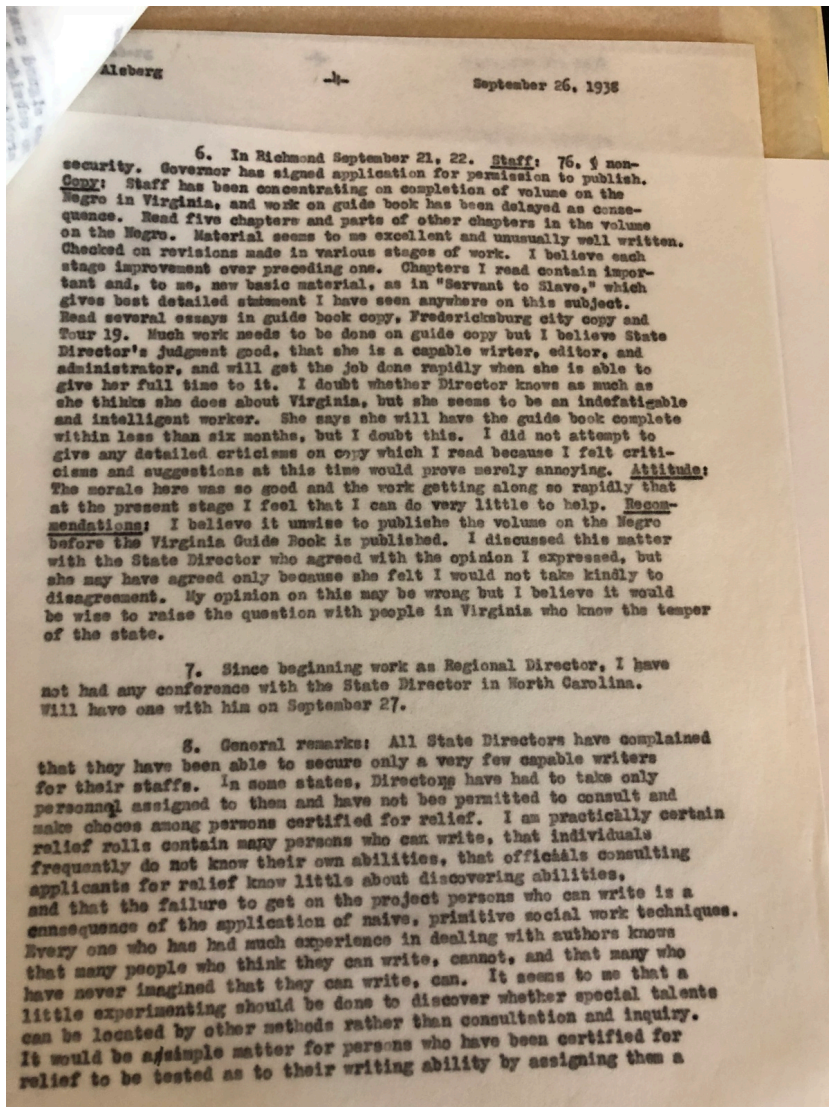Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
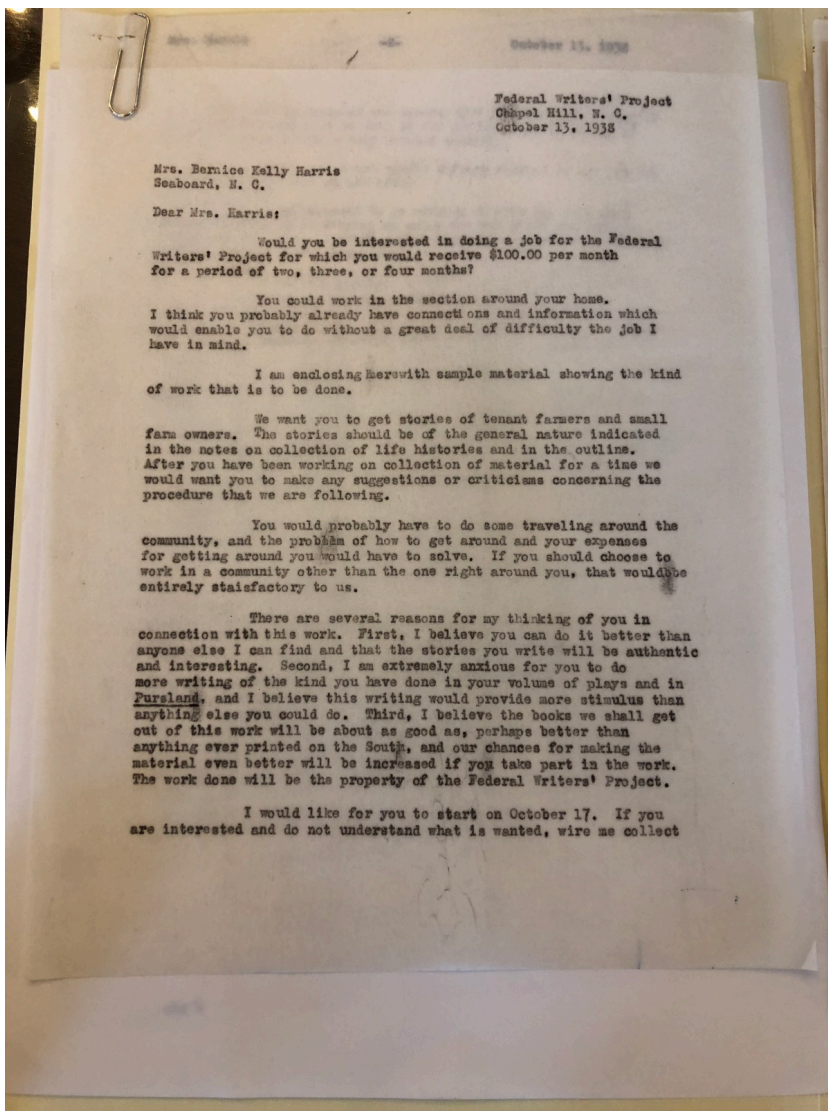
Federal Writers' Project,
Chapel Hill, N.C.
February 28, 1939

Mr. Henry G. Alsberg, Director,
Federal Writers' Project,
The Ouray Building,
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Alsberg:

I have your letter of February 25th, listing Negroes in North Carolina who might be able to qualify for positions on the Federal Writers' Project. I am baffled as to the reason for sending me these names. At the present time there are no non-relief vacancies in any one of the State staffs or in the Regional staff.

If any vacancies should occur and if any of these persons listed should be specially qualified for any work being done or any new work, then of course we might be able to use them.

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; but at the same time I get the impression that I am expected to do something which I have not done.

I would appreciate your clarifying this matter for me and giving me definite instructions if I have omitted doing something which I am supposed to do. 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 definite prospect of vacancies in which they might be used.

Sincerely yours,

William T. Couch,
Regional Director,
Federal Writers' Project

WTC/cc

cc: Mrs. Blanche M. Ralston

Figure 58
Folder 1124 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
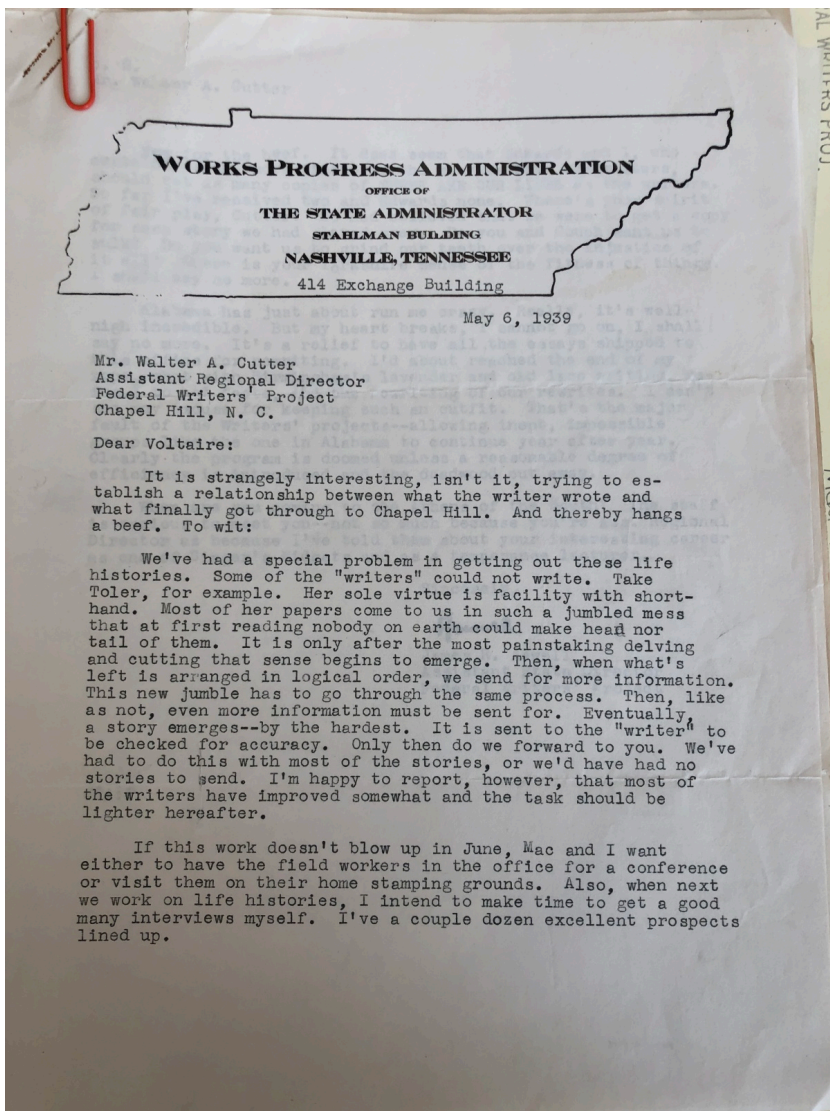
MEMORANDUM

TO: STATE DIRECTORS, FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT, IN REGION #3

FROM: WILLIAM T. COUCH, REGIONAL DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: WORK ON LIFE HISTORIES

1. The Regional Office has in hand from writers on the Project in North Carolina approximately 90 life histories. Some of the stories from North Carolina writers are excellent; practically all are publishable without further revision. All of the stories were written by individuals; no re-writing has been done except to correct minor oversights. It is important for State Directors to note that stories can be written by the writers themselves; that revisions altering the text in any essential way should be made only in collaboration with the writers.

2. From Alabama the Regional Office has 28 life histories. Several of these are excellent and publishable practically as they are! About half need some revision to cut out generalizations and terms expressing the feelings of the writers; most of them need to be increased to a length of at least 10 to 15 pages. We are finding that the stories have to be at least 10 pages in length. We have found also that it is desirable to make some stories as long as 30 to 40 pages. Please change, therefore, paragraph 2 in the manual to read as follows: "The life histories may range from approximately 2,500 to 10,000 words or more, depending upon the interest of the material."

3. No other states/have sent in life histories.

4. It is important for State Directors to understand that the stories must be original, first-hand material. The procedure in getting the stories cannot be that of having the writers collect information such as answers to questions and then have the stories written up in central offices.

5. Our first efforts to get life histories have almost uniformly met with "It can't be done." Please type manuals and sample stories and get them in the hands of some of your writers anyway. We know the job can be done because it is being done and we shall take particular plea-sure in sending writers into places that do not get us stories because "it can't be done." Usually this feeling has been expressed by persons who have not yet understood what is being done. In order to understand it is necessary to read the manual and the sample life histories.

6. Every state in this region now has a large enough staff to assign a number of good writers to this task and this can be done without inter-fering with other work. It is unwise to assume that any person cannot do this kind of work until after some of his material has been submit-ted to the Regional Office and criticized there.

Figure 59
Folder 1165 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

jcr.

10097-M

EDITORIAL REPORT ON STATE COPY
(2 carbons required)

State .....North Carolina.....   Date .....October 27, 1938.....

Subject .....Mill Village Sketches.....   Rating .....Good.....

While these sketches are remarkably good for field reports,
a few show a tendency towards overwriting. The most effect-
ive stories are those simply told -- where the characters
speak for themselves, with small assistance from the inter-
viewer. In many of the pieces we could stand additional ma-
terial in regard to the social life of the people: the role
of the church -- fraternal orders (Masons, Odd Fellows, Elks,
V. F. W. or American Legion, Knights of Columbus, and secret
semi-terroristic organizations like the Klan or Silver Shirts)
-- pool rooms and bars -- traveling shows -- local pageants or
fairs -- children's games and songs.

The following quote from John Pierce illustrates a too obvious
striving for effect that should be avoided:
     "John was still preoccupied. . .when a woman turned
     into the lane. . .The woman might have been a bookkeeper,
     a teacher, a stenographer, a clerk, or perhaps a social
     worker. . .In reality she was a woman who wanted to know
     the thoughts and feelings in the minds and hearts of cot-
     ton mill people."
The other sketches, where the research worker is neither de-
scribed nor introduced, are better. This is particularly un-
fortunate in the John Pierce story, because the story itself is
interesting and important.

We especially wish to call attention to the "Snow White" episode
in Description of Mill Village as an important contribution to a
folkways study. Bill Branch is a good character study; Elvira
Barbee writing about the "stretch-out" to President Roosevelt,
should be mentioned, as should also Jones I. Freeze, Ida Allen,
Miss Emma Willis, Ed and Mary Jackson, John Rogers, Produce Truck-
er, and Nannie Ruth Parks. The story of Eva Hardison (Four Famil-
ies on Reservoir Street) is almost a novel in itself -- a beauti-
fully tragic description of a working woman's sacrifice for her
family and an ideal. We find that practically all of the studies
are very well good indeed, and select the above only because they
seem to represent the best of a collection.

Figure 60
Folder 1097 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
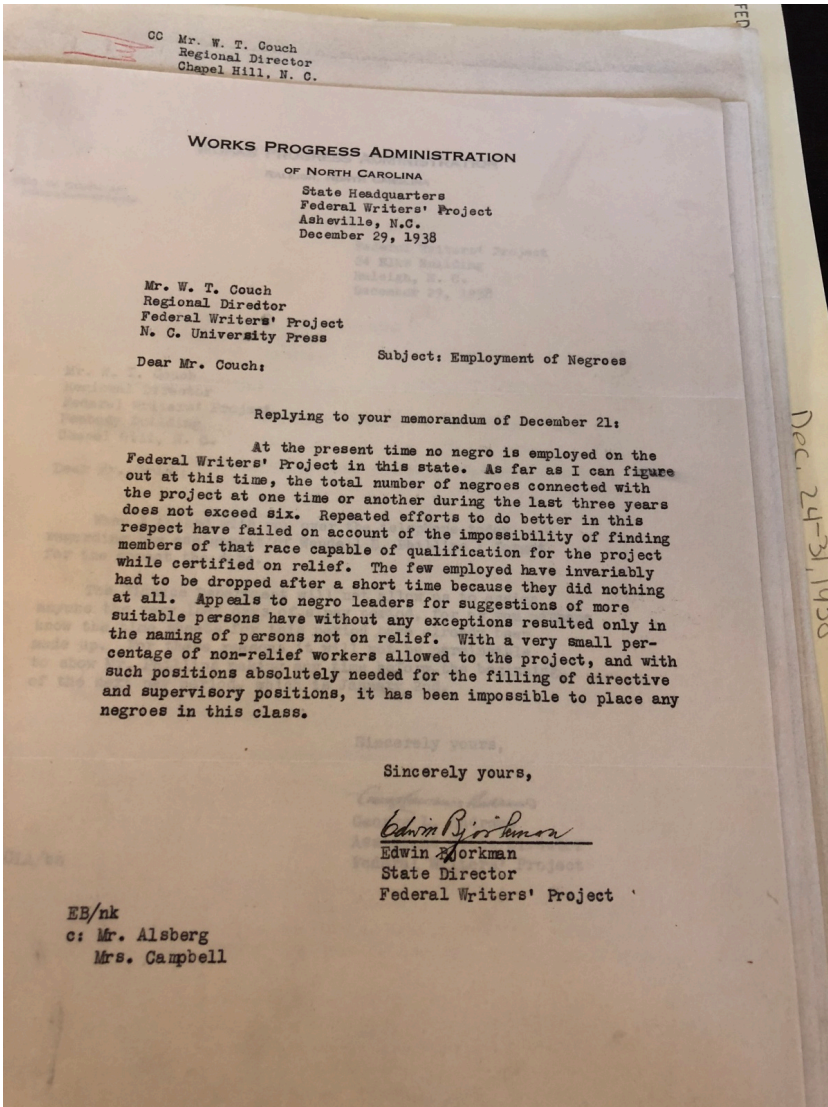
January 5, 1939

Mrs. Annie A. Rose
Federal Writers' Project
356 Cherry Street
Macon, Georgia

Dear Mrs. Rose:

I have read with great interest your life history of Fannie Hopkins, and I think you have done a very good job. You have given the story a very human quality, and after reading it I felt that I really had seen the woman.

I have one or two suggestions to make. The principal one is in the description of the woman herself. It would be better not to be too precise, as in this sentence on page 1: "She is about five feet, five inches high and weighs close to one hundred and fifty pounds." This would be all right if you were filling out a form, but in this kind of work it would be better to give an _impression_ rather than an estimate of dimensions. I would suggest something like this: "She is a woman of medium height and rather stocky build."

Be careful of typographical errors, transposition, and mistakes in spelling, since this paper was good enough to send to Mr. Couch without rewriting. Please proofread each article carefully after you finish and make such corrections.

I think that with practice you will turn in still better work, and I hope you will soon send others, white people as well as Negroes. It is natural that you should feel some hesitancy in approaching them, but it will be a valuable and interesting experience. Consult your friends, family, and WPA associates for suggestions for further interviews.

This is a very satisfactory beginning, and we shall hope to have more of these life histories soon.

Yours very truly,

Samuel Y. Tupper, Jr.
State Director
Federal Writers' Project

Figure 61
Folder 1112 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Federal Writers' Project
Chapel Hill, N. C.
December 21, 1938

Mrs. B. K. Harris
Federal Writers' Project
Seaboard, N. C.

My dear Mrs. Harris:

I have recently joined the Federal Writers' Project as Assistant Regional Director. Already acquainted with your writings through the News and Observer, I have read your contributions to this project with both interest and appreciation. You have a capacity which I can only envy. There are certain suggestions which I shall make in this letter. Please do not think of these as "official", but as attempts to pool all our resources in an effort to make these histories of significant interest to readers.

1. Description

You have a fine feeling for description and your descriptions are usually very comprehensive. In fact they are often too comprehensive. By which I mean this: Let us ask ourselves what we are trying to do in these personal histories. (Of course in writings wholly descriptive, this observation does not apply.) 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.

For example, when a person goes calling in city or country, it is extremely unlikely that he will stand for a considerable time in front of the house registering impressions. He usually gets a general impression of orderliness or disorderliness, attractiveness or unattractiveness, squalor or neatness. Yet a long particularized description does suggest that first method of approach. Description

Figure 62
Folder 1108 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Copy for Mr. Couch

State Headquarters
Federal Writers' Project
Asheville, N.C.
Nov. 9, 1938

Andrews
Northrop
Jones
Corley
Saunders

In getting up life histories of mill workers, tenant farmers, etc., the following points should be kept in mind:

1. These stories are not to be built on a single, sharply defined pattern. Instead, variation of form is desirable, provided always that the general scheme be not disregarded.

2. The points of information listed in the instructions do not constitute a questionnaire, every part of which has to be covered in every case, but a reminder to the workers enabling them to guide the informants for the extraction of the greatest possible scope of data.

3. While many of the pictures presented will be drab or dark, we are not looking exclusively for material of this kind. The collection as a whole is meant to present a cross section of life embodying the brighter as well as the darker aspects of the field under study.

4. The stories, to be effective, should reflect as much as possible of the personalities of the people interviewed, and as little as possible of the interviewer. This does not mean that the stories necessarily must be told in the first person.

5. Finally, the sooner we get going good along this line, the better. Just now it is our main line of work, though not the only one.

Sincerely yours,

Edwin Bjorkman
State Director
Federal Writers' Project

EB/nk
P.S. This goes to all District Supervisors.
EB

Figure 63
Folder 1100 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
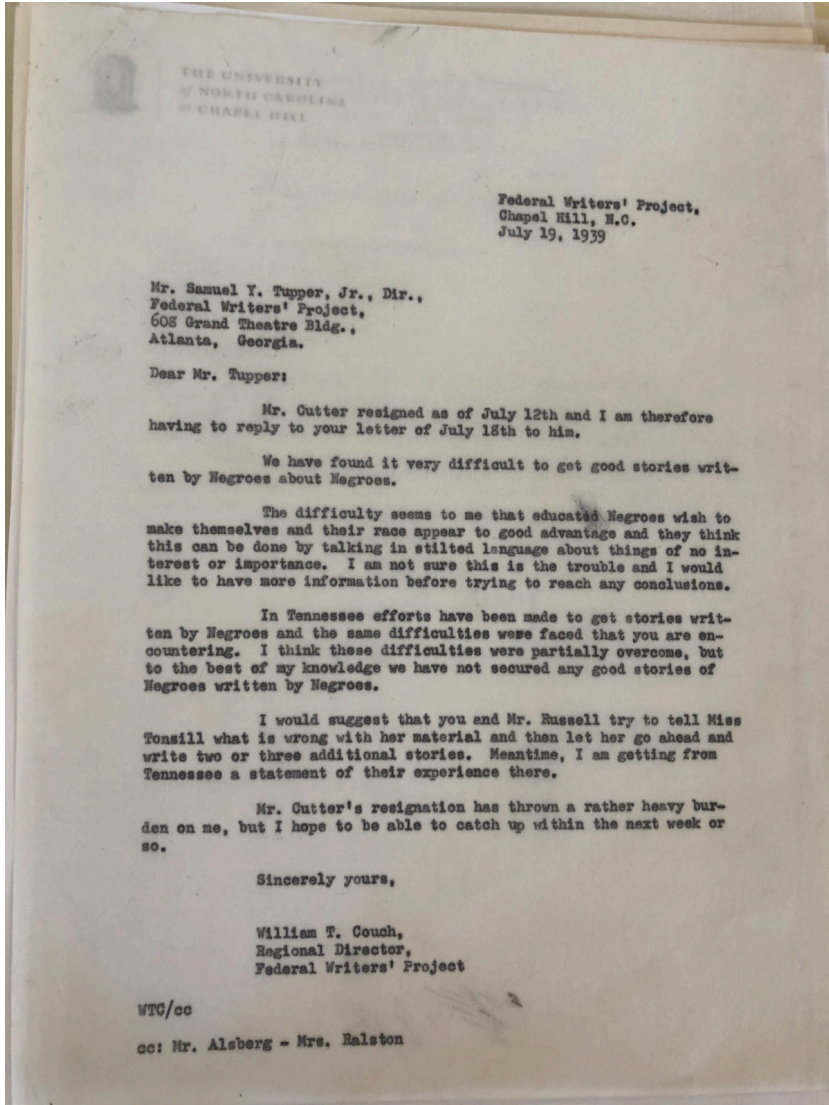
Miss Myrtle Miles   - 2 -   Nov. 12, 1938

books and magazines of the better type are there unless you are fairly sure that what you man by "better type" is what the reader will have in mind. Since you cannot assume this, it is best to avoid such generalities. In the same paragraph the opening phrase in the next sentence is unnecessary, and should be cut to the comma. Two questions occurred to me when I read the latter part of the sentence. First, if the books referred to are really "older than the United States" they might be of some monetary value and it would not be a bad idea to learn more of them. I suspect that the author has made an error at this point. If the books on the shelves of this family really date back to beyond 1776, these books probably have a story, a story which would involve people (the books would be used merely to give a center or a thread for a story about people) and the author ought to get this story. The latter part of this sentence, however, makes me fear the author has slipped. Numbers of magazines published only a quarter of a century ago are negligible in importance to books that date prior to 1776. The inclusion of these two items of such widely discrepant values (books dating prior to 1776 and magazines a quarter of a century old) gives a ludicrous anticlimatic effect which the author most probably did not intend, or if he did intend it, he will have to change his intention if his stories are to be used. Details of this kind should be carefully checked and nobody's word taken for them, except that where the author is repeating what is said to him, he should repeat as closely as he can just what is said whether what is said is erroneous or not. Anything erroneous not in quotes is the author's error; and we cannot be tolerant of errors not in quotes. Your author should be cautioned that it is not easy to establish the date of a book and that he should be very careful how he makes statements of the kind made here. The next and last paragraphs contain information which is interesting and important.

3. **Hobbies, Pets and Children,** by E.F.H. This story sounds as if it were written for publication as a newspaper serial. It is just as good or bad, however you may regard it, as most serials. The language is too large; words are too long. If the characters in this story really talk as the author has them talk here, then he has made a discovery. I confess I have some suspicion that the author is pulling my leg. This author will probably do good work if he will write what he himself hears, sees and smells, rather than what he has learned to expect to hear, see and smell through reading newspaper serials or similar matter. I think the author has skill which can be extremely useful if it can be got to work properly.

4. **The Alexanders,** by S.R.O'B. Very good, but entirely too short. On page 2 the moulds suggest a possible cue for more material. Why not ask E.J. how he got the moulds ? Who sold them to him ? What kind of arguments were used to get him into the business ? What kinds of people buy the plaster dogs ? At least 5 or 10 pages of extremely interesting material could be got in conversational form on these questions and I can assure you that if you really get the straight stuff on this subject you will have something worth publishing. This sort of material, that is, the sort which isn't developed in this story, reveals the character and qualities of people, and we must get this as well as the information included in the outline left with you.

Figure 64
Folder 1101 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
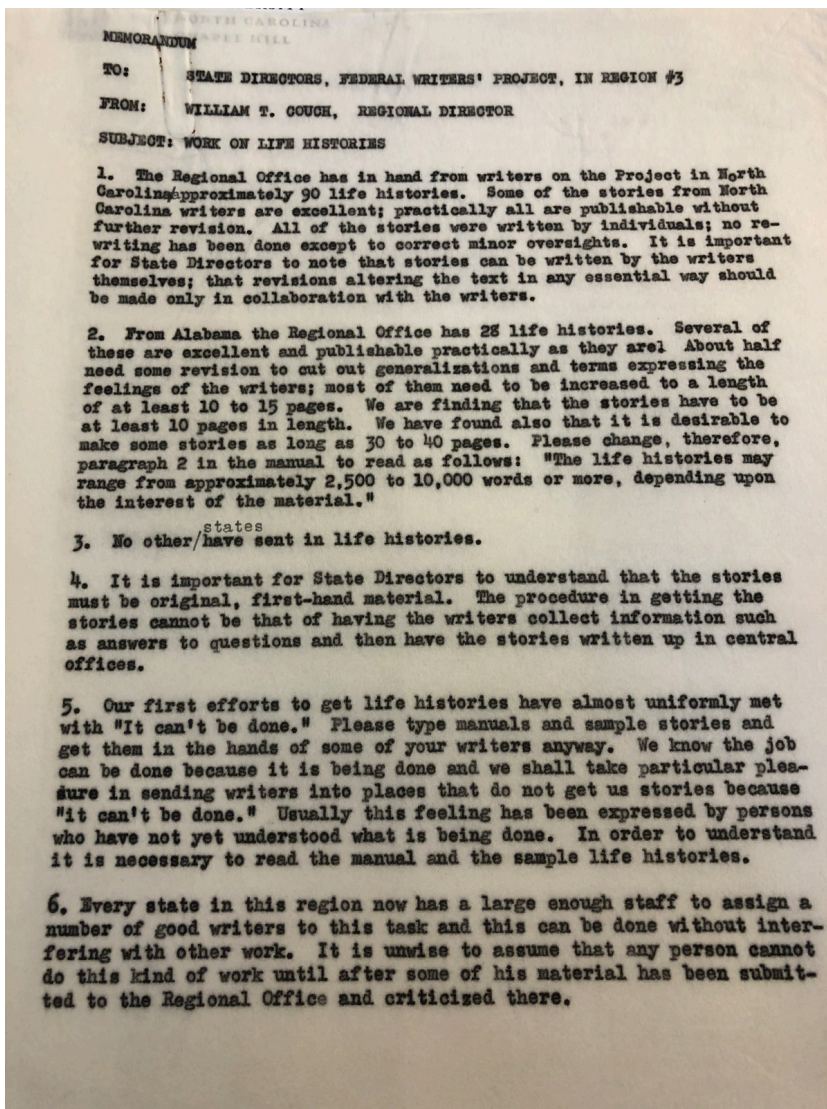
Figure 65
Folder 1101 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Edisto Island, S. C.
November 30, 1938

Miss Mabel Montgomery
State Director
Federal Writers' Project
Columbia, S. C.

Dear Miss Montgomery:

I am very glad to receive a copy of A Day At Mary Rumbley's House, since the district office will not be ready to give out copies for a day or so, and I would like to get a fair start on my case history. The story made a deep impression upon me. No wonder Mr. Couch rated it highly. Simply told without embrodiery, or any attempt to "fine writing", it gives a vivid word picture of an humble ex-mill worker and her neighbors. What pleases me most, perhaps, is the fact that it is told in a non-sentimental way. The author never intrudes her own personality. This alone is quite refreshing. It is, I consider, an excellent model.

Yesterday at Miss Butler's request, I held a conference with the workers who are planning to write case histories. I had several pages of Mary Rumbley's story read aloud, and I believe that this helped in clearing up some of the problems. 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 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.

The workers told me that they had pages full of notes but somehow just couldn't get a start. I advised them to begin writing anyhow and as they wrote to imagine that the person was sitting in the room with them chatting away; to pick out what they thought was the most interesting thing for the lead; avoid all stilted or formal language and all cliches, and bear in mind that what was chiefly wanted was an interesting story about real people. "Please impress on your minds the fact that you are dealing with the human element, and not abstractions. You are writing about a person of flesh and blood; not a historical character or an ancient dwelling of Charleston. "'The play is the thing' - the human drama in the contemporary world. This assignment can easily be the most interesting one you have undertaken. You will discover this for yourself as you get into your story." In this way, I hope I managed to put my point across.

Figure 66
Folder 1103 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

WALKER-JOHNSON BUILDING
1734 NEW YORK AVENUE NW.
WASHINGTON, D. C.

HARRY L. HOPKINS
ADMINISTRATOR

September 8, 1938.

Mr. W. T. Couch, Regional Director,
Federal Writers' Project,
Works Progress Administration,
University Press,
Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

My dear Mr. Couch:

I learned, on my return from a short vacation, that your change
of status finally went through. I was very pleased to hear this, since
I consider the "Life Histories" project you are going to supervise one
of the most important jobs we are doing anywhere in the country.

By the way, I have read the sample "Life Histories" you sent
me. I think they contain a great deal of good material. However, I do
feel, as you do, that they are perhaps a little sentimental -- smack too
much of the case worker's psychology, and are slightly patronizing. It
appears to me they should contain a harder, more clearly drawn picture
of the people and more facts about their lives.

I hope we will be getting in some more of these "Life Histories"
pretty soon. I suppose by now you have gotten up some sort of instructions
according to which the field workers can do their questioning. Will you
send me copies of any such instructions you are getting out? 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.

It may interest you to know that I used several of these Life
Histories as the final push to get the approval for your change of status.
They were quite effective propaganda.

I hope you will have a fruitful trip through the Southern States
and will be able to get the project working efficiently.

One other thing, we are rather anxious to get a copy of the
contract for the North Carolina book. We would like to be sure that
that matter has been closed once and for all, since the North Carolina book
is so near completion.

Yours very truly,

Henry G. Alsberg,
Director of the Federal Writers' Project.

Figure 67
Folder 1090 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
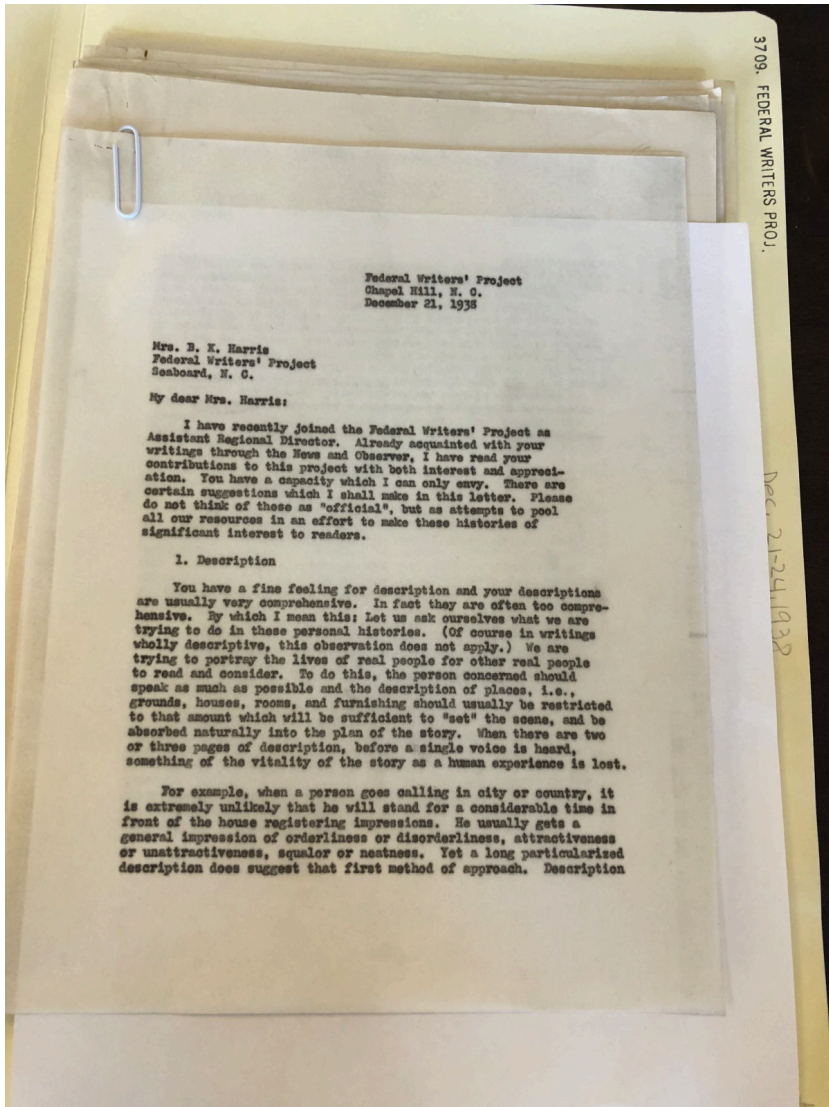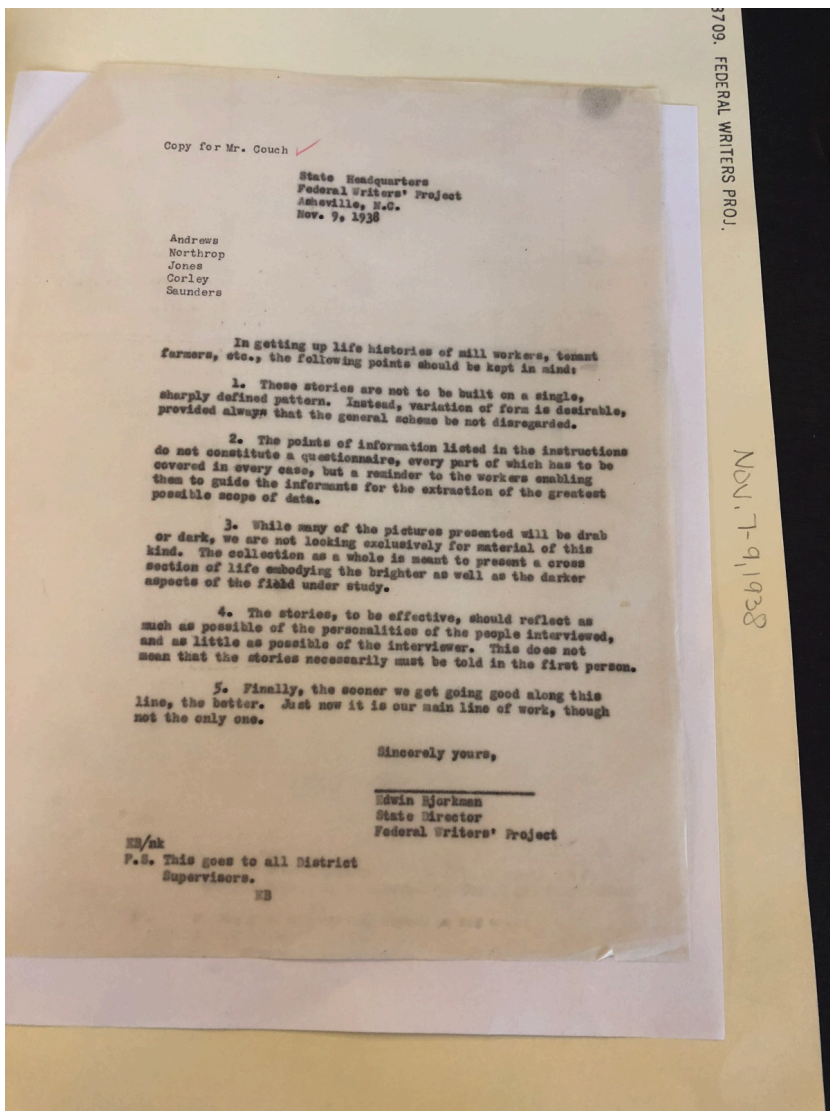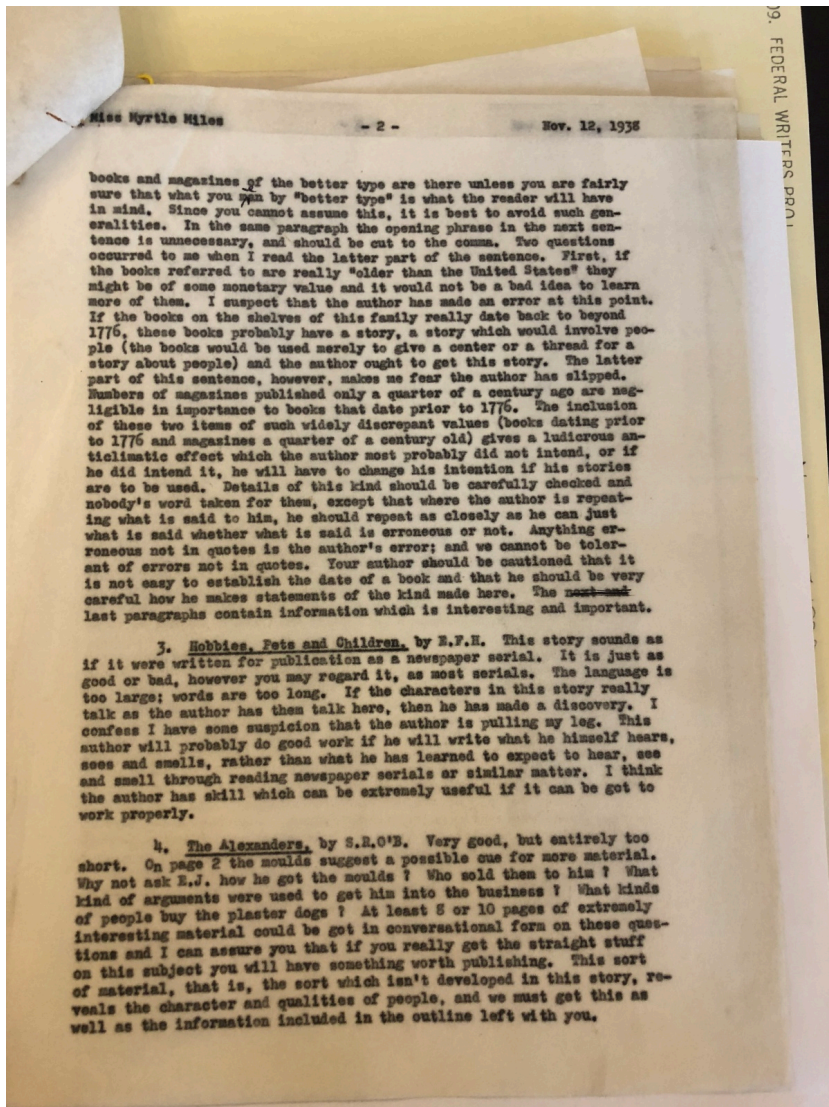
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
OFFICE OF
THE STATE ADMINISTRATOR
STAHLMAN BUILDING
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE
414 Exchange Building

December 29, 1938

Mr. W. T. Couch, Regional Director
Federal Writers' Project
Chapel Hill, N. C.

Dear Mr. Couch:

We enclose herewith original and one carbon
copy of the life history LIVED TOO LONG.

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.

Sincerely yours,

William R. McDaniel
State Director
Federal Writers' Project

WRMcD:F
enc.
cc: Mr. Alsberg

Figure 68
Folder 1109 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
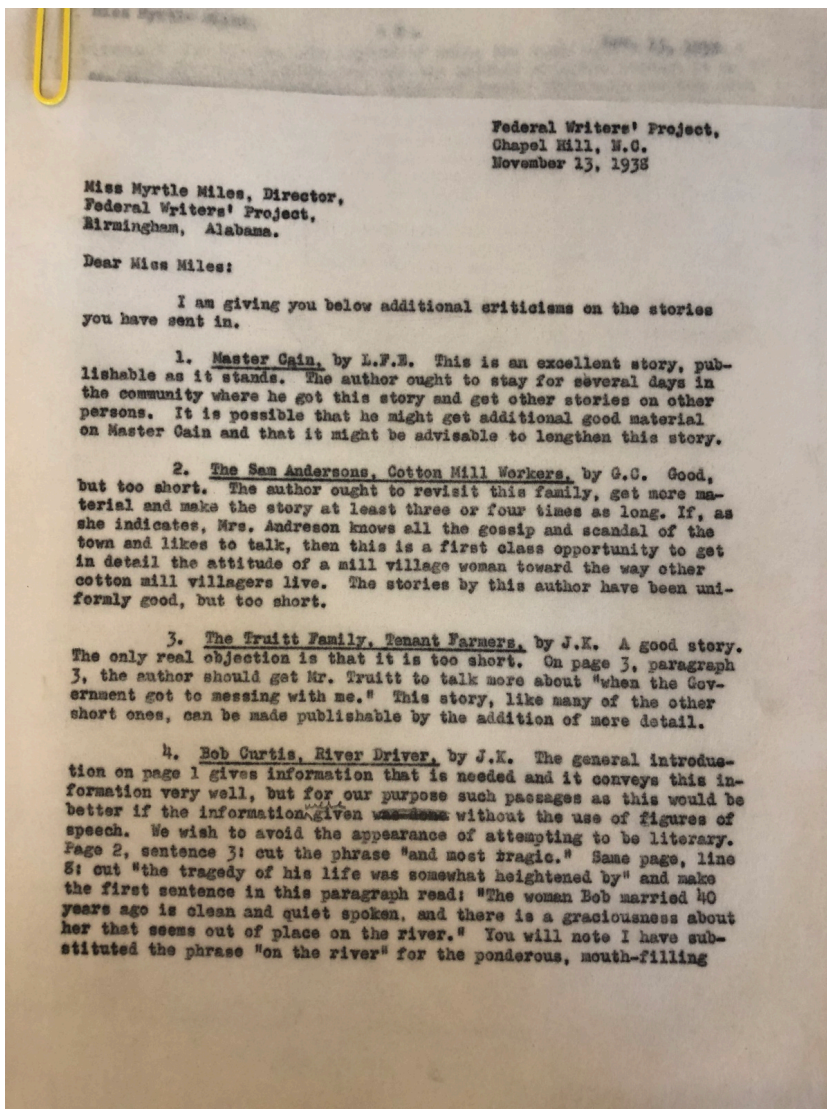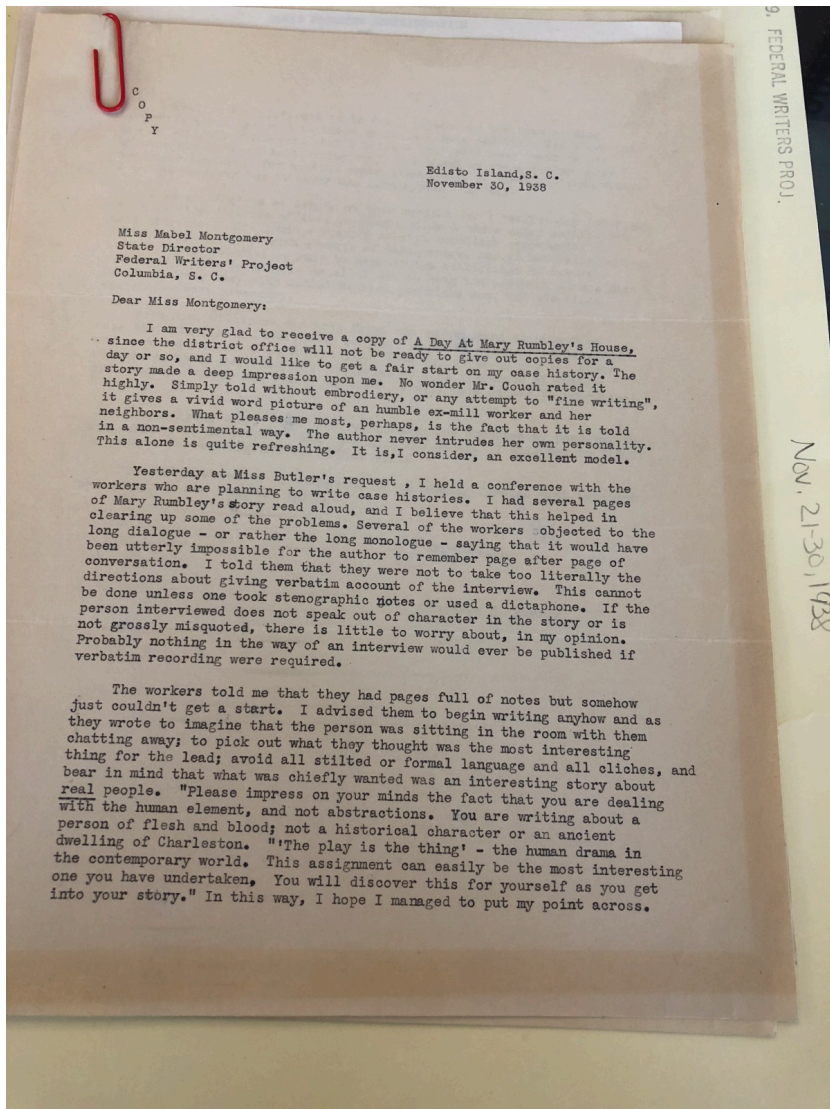Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 69
Folder 1116 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
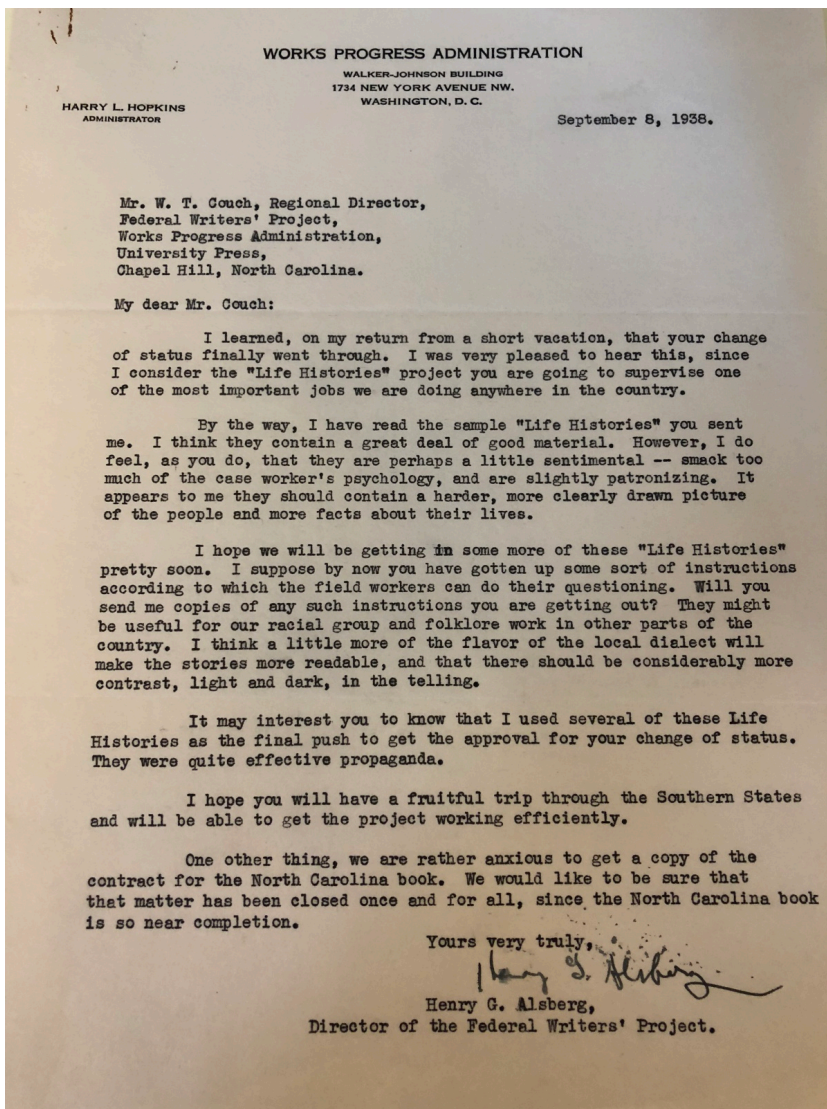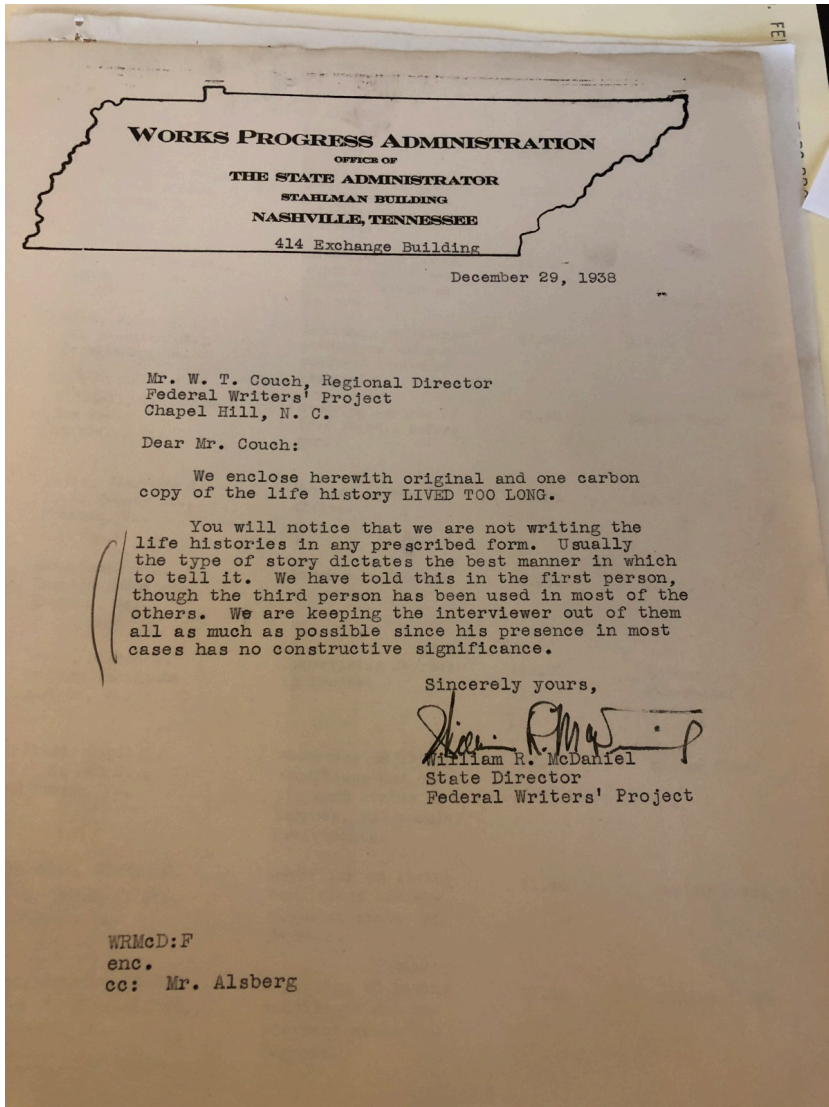
ANNOUNCER: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. This is the third in a series of programs dealing with the activities of the University of North Carolina Press. These programs are part of the plan of the University of North Carolina Extension Division to acquaint the people of the State with what is going on in the University and its affiliated divisions. Last week Miss Patsy McMullen of the University Press staff discussed the novel PURSLANE, by Mrs. Bernice Kelly Harris. Today,_____ _____ will discuss a rather unusual venture in books, entitled THESE ARE OUR LIVES.

Thank you very much, _____ and good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

Last week you heard a discussion of the first novel ever published by the University of North Carolina Press. This was an exciting occasion. Today we have a great deal of pleause in telling you about another book. Before giving you some seléctions from the book itself I should like to tell you something of how the book came about.

Some months ago, W.T. Couch, Director of the University of North Carolina Press, became part-time Regional Director of the Federal Writers' Project. For a long time Mr. Couch had had the idea that the great mass of Southern people had never been adequately portrayed. His connection with the Federal Writers' Project gave him a splendid opportunity to help do the job of showing something of the nature and quality of life of people in this section of the United States. The idea was to get life histories which are faithful representations of living people. These, when taken together, should give a fair picture of the structure and workings of Southern society.

Figure 70
Folder 1166 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

COPY

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Washington, D.C.

May 3, 1939

Mr. W.T. Couch, Director,
University of North Carolina Press,
Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Dear Mr. Couch:

I think you have done a fine advance informational job on THESE ARE OUR LIVES. In spite of the fact that Time Magazine did not adhere to the publication date, their review of the book seems to me like a direct result of your efforts to make the book known among literary critics and sociologists.

Your advertising plans are very good inasmuch as they seem to cover all the periodicals with readers who would be interested in a book like THESE ARE OUR LIVES. I have no other advertising medium to suggest unless it is Publishers' Weekly, and you have probably already thought of that magazine.

You will be interested to know that we are releasing a news story for national consumption on the book, which will go to newspapers and news agencies on publication date. In addition, we would suggest that the University of North Carolina Press issue a literary note describing the manner in which the book was written, and saying something about its contributors. It is an excellent example of good collective writing, and I think that followers of contemporary literature would be interested in that angle of the book.

I wonder if you will be good enough to send us a copy of the contract that the University Press has signed with the University of North Carolina for THESE ARE OUR LIVES ? As you know, we require for our record a copy of every contract that is made for Federal Writers' Project books. Incidentally, we should also appreciate receiving a contract made for the North Carolina Guide.

Very truly yours,

(signed) HENRY G. ALSBERG
Director of the Federal Writers' Project

Figure 71
Folder 1135 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

COMMENTS OF REVIEWERS ON "THESE ARE OUR LIVES"

GREENSBORO DAILY NEWS - 5/21/39 - Robert Register

"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.

JOURNAL - 5/18/39 -- DUNNAGAN CONTRIBUTES ARTICLE FOR FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT

"These Are Our Lives," written by members of Federal Writers' Projects in North Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia, which will come out soon, will carry a contribution by a member of the Winston-Salem project.

Claude B. Dunnagan, who is on the staff of the project located in the old West End school building, entitled the article "Get Out and Hoe." It runs to approximately 3,500 words and is the story of a tenant farm family.

The book is being published by the University of North Carolina Press and contains authentic life stories of families ranging from sharecroppers and those working in cotton mills to farm owners.

In all there are about 50 contributions in the book.

Dunnagan is 21 years old and expects to take up work at the University of North Carolina this summer and secure a degree next year.

WINSTON SALEM JOURNAL & SENTINEL - 5/21/39 - Art King.

W.T. Couch, of Chapel Hill, regional director of federal writers explains the purpose of this particular new deal project is to "get life histories which
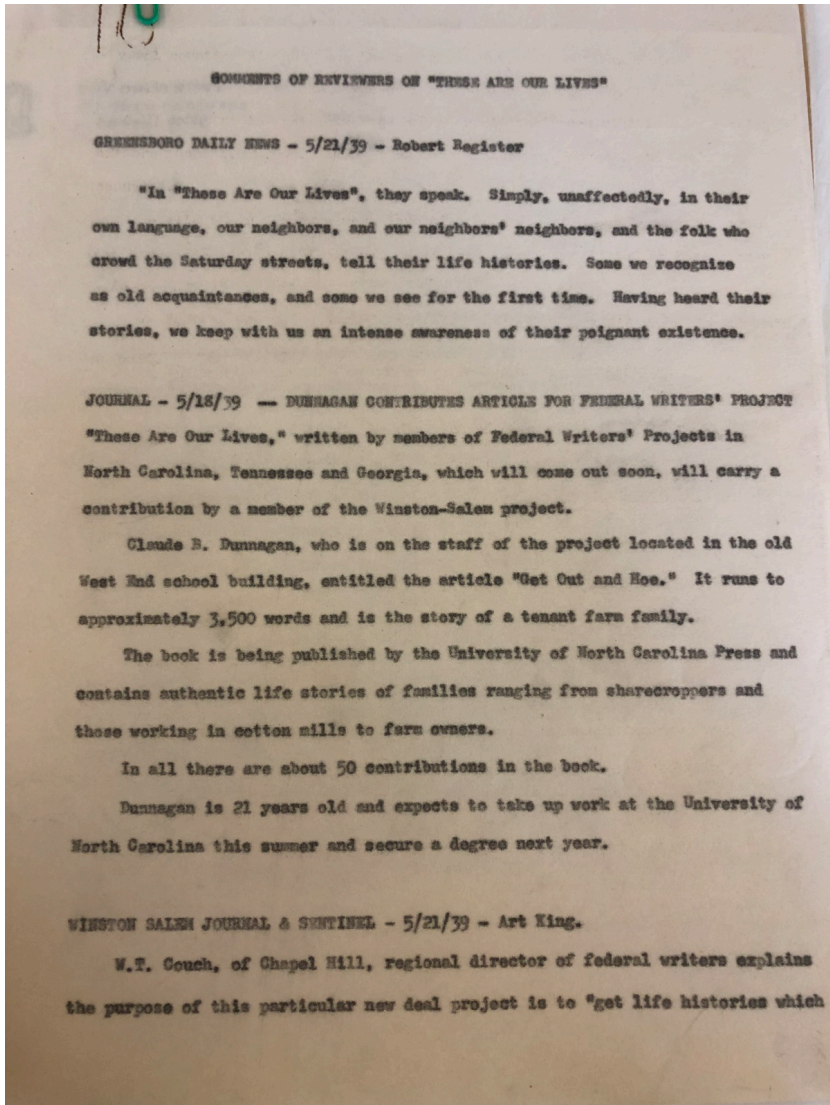
Figure 72
Folder 1140 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

from TIME
THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE

May 1, 1939

Voice of the People

THESE ARE OUR LIVES—*Federal Writers' Project—University of North Carolina Press ($2).*

► Sarah Easton, a rawboned, middle-aged woman with an eroded face, was "raised hard." She lives with her moon-faced husband and their 16-year-old twin daughters in a neat, sagging one-room shack near Raleigh, N. C. They live on $4 or $5 a week, remember good times when they had $12. They own a 1924 Dodge but can't afford to run it. Years ago, discouraged by debts and annual babies, John started drinking "like a hog in a bucket of slops." But when Sarah drank cotton-root tea to bring on a nearly fatal miscarriage, John was sobered. "God knows, Sarah," he said, "I love the brats but I'm worried about how to look after them." Next time he took to drink, Sarah "suddenly took a notion that I could beat the stuffin out of him, and I did. I got a barrel stave and I turned him across the table bench and I blistered his rump."

When twins · came along the doctor charged double, "and from that minute on ever' bill has doubled it seems like." While waiting for times to get better they fortify themselves with a helpful game. While eating a breakfast consisting of only black coffee "we poke the fun at rich people and pretend that we are having just what we want. We ask each other polite-like to have toast and jelly and bacon and eggs and it shore helps."

► The Turners—nine in all—are Negro sharecroppers, who clear about $50 a year. Thinks Gracie: "De gover'ment's got no business a-payin' out relief money and a-givin' WP and A jobs to farmers. . . . If 'twas fixed right dey'd make all de livin' dey need from de ground." What worries her most is having had to drop out of the burial association which costs 25¢ each time a member dies. Haunted by the prospect of a pauper's grave, Gracie prays: "Please keep death off till I get out'n dis shape."

► When Farmer X was a young fellow, a Yankee sawmill superintendent took a fancy to him, taught him to be a timber estimator. He bought a 200-acre farm, raised a family, slipped a little each year as the land got poorer. Now he philosophizes: "Life don't work like a job of work. You study out how to do a job and do it. But when it comes to living, they's not any way you can plan it and have it go according." He doesn't blame the Government though. "Our troubles," guesses Farmer X, "is just because we've lived too long."

► Joe, 5 ft. 2 in., 200 lbs., is a Negro handyman in Knoxville, who "jest don't care nothin' about a stiddy job." Says Joe: "The Lord cut me out in the shape of a man that's naturally made to have a good time. But he didn't give me the money to have that good time."

Six months ago W. T. Couch, regional director of the Federal Writers' Project, sent his best writers out to get the life stories of a typical cross section of Southern sharecroppers, landlords, millworkers and owners, relief workers, storekeepers, etc. No editorializing was allowed; stories were to be told mainly in the first person; the results were to be judged on "accuracy, human interest, social importance, literary excellence." Result: something new in sociological writing, a 421-page volume of 35 such true stories to be published May 20. Already exciting advance comment (Charles Beard: "As literature more powerful than anything I have ever read in fiction."), it gives the South its most pungent picture of common life, the Writers' Project its strongest claim to literary distinction.

Figure 73
Folder 1135 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Washington, D.C.

Mr. William T. Couch
University of North Carolina Press
Chapel Hill, N.C.

Dear Bill:

          After reading about two-thirds of THESE ARE OUR
LIVES I am pleased to give you the following reaction to
it.

          THESE ARE OUR LIVES personified Economic Problem
Number 1. Instead of statistics and theories it gives
us vivid life portraits and stories of absorbing interest.
The Writers' Project is to be congratulated on an excellent
task of selection -- selection first of the significant
types to portray the humbler folk in the South, second of
the socially significant episodes in the lives of these
people which depict without sensational exaggeration. It
is folk literature of truly basic integrity. It is impor-
tant to know what they think and feel as to classify their
economic position.

          Very truly yours,

          T.J. Woofter, Jr., Chief
            Rural Surveys Section

Figure 74
Folder 1135 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical
Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 75
Folder 1137 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

COPY

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
OF NORTH CAROLINA

Federal Writers' Project,
24 Elks Building,
Raleigh, N.C.
May 11, 1939

Dr. Walter A. Cutter,
Asst. Regional Director,
Federal Writers' Project,
Bynum Bldg. Chapel Hill, N.C.

Dear Dr. Cutter:

I am glad to have your letter, as well as Mr. Couch's, regarding LIFE's intention of running a picture story on THESE ARE OUR LIVES.

I shall be glad to cooperate in every way possible and hope if you can find out when LIFE's photographer will be in this section you will let me know.

Because the names have been changed and some stories obtained without the subjects knowing the stories would be printed and as others were assured that they would receive no publicity, it would be better if it possibly can be done to have LIFE's photographer make pictures in some instances of typical cases.

Sincerely yours,

(signed) Geo. L. Andrews,
Assistant State Director,
Federal Writers' Project

Figure 76
Folder 1137 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 77
Folder 1119 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Figure 78
Folder 1141 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Page #2

Mr. Tarleton Collier

Arthur Raper of Agnes Scott adds powerful original testimony collected by himself over a period of seven years in Georgia, in his Preface to Peasantry.

Howard Odum, native Georgian, now of the University of North Carolina, in his volume Southern Regions has done the most comprehensive and conclusive work of anyone on this subject. The findings of all these scholars are the same; namely: The South is the Nation's Economic Problem Number One.

The South is in far better economic condition today than it was before the New Deal. It is in better condition only because the New Deal has been interested in this region as well as the rest of the Nation. We still have lower wages, lower salaries, less food and clothes and other material goods per capita than any other comparable region in the Nation. We never can have general prosperity or a reasonable measure of wealth and health in this region unless we face the truth. No matter how sincere and intelligent Mr. Roosevelt's efforts, He 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 attempts to obscure these truths are doing themselves and the South the greatest possible damage.

                    . . . .

I feel somewhat in the position of one who takes a man out and shows him an enormous ditch and says - "There is a ditch." The man replies, "No, it is not a ditch, it is a mountain." Under such circumstances I hardly know what to say. Of course I know someone's eyes are bad, if something worse isn't wrong.

As I indicated above, you may use this in any way, cut it, condense it, rewrite it, or throw it in the waste basket.

I enjoyed very much the visit with you and Miss Wilkins in Atlanta. I look forward to seeing you at the conference in Birmingham in November.

With best regards,

Sincerely yours,

William T. Couch

Figure 79
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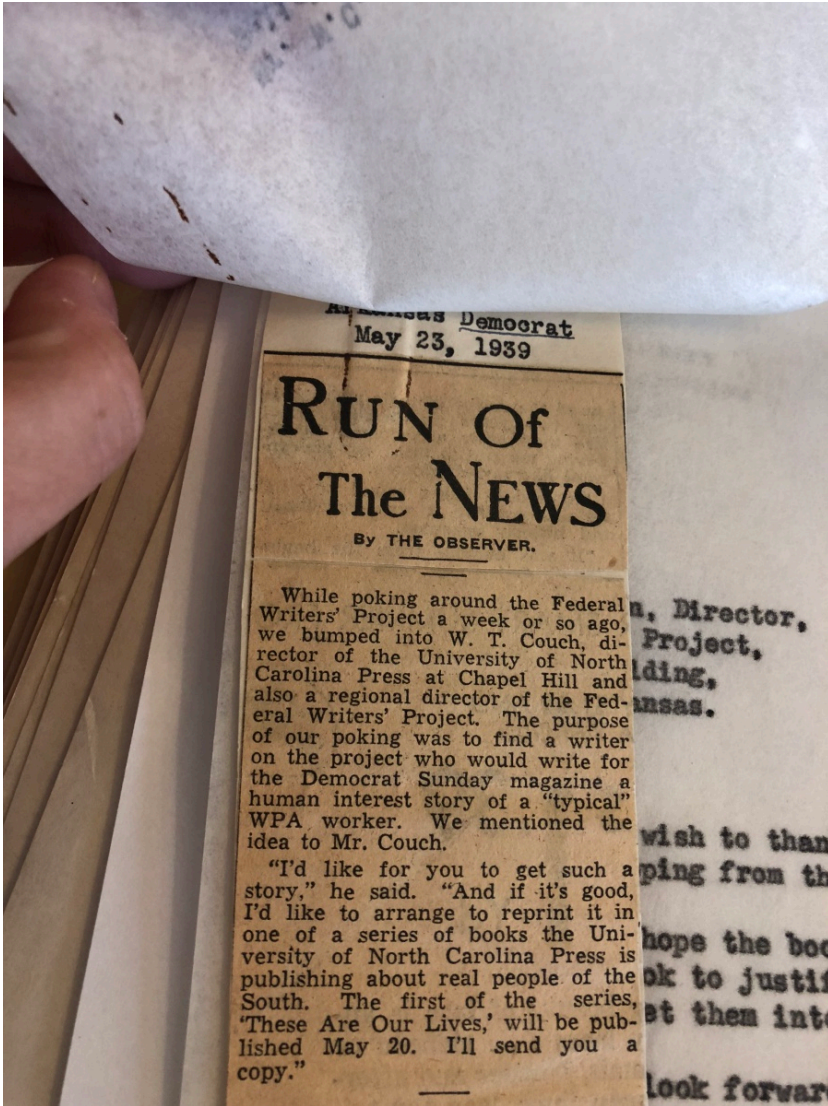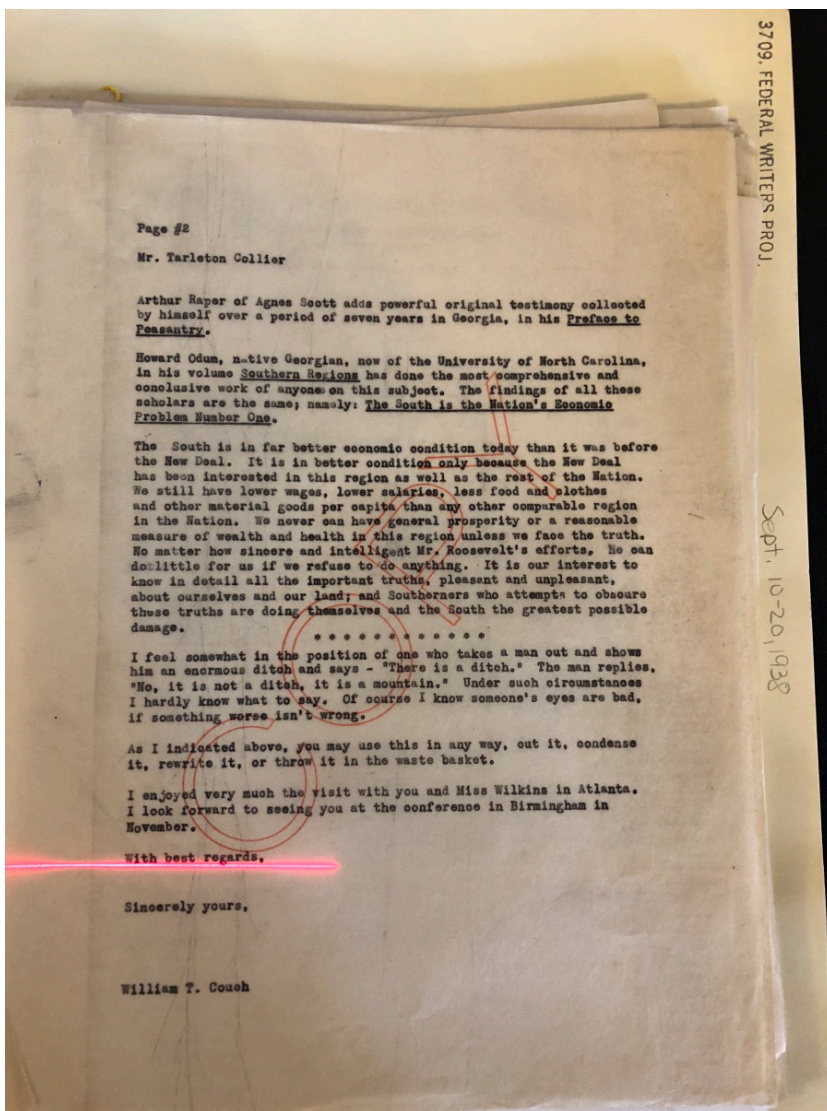
48 Tribune Street
Concord, N. C.
September 26, 1938

Dear Mr. Couch:

At the end of this week I expect to send you several more stories. I hope they are what you want.

I am sorry that you find the stories "serious and sombre"; and lacking in humor. In giving the broad outlines of a life it is almost impossible to have it because most people's lives just aren't humorous — especially to themselves. Humor is a sporadic, unaccountable thing that crops up here and there on the surface but it isn't a part of the main stream, so to speak. I thought I made some of the stories rather pleasant, showing the people not lacking in gayety and what you call humor, but I suppose I failed. Of course many of the things that are humorous to me — say Elvira's moaning over her health, her daughter, and her courtship — are not humorous to the person involved.

I'm not sure the method we're using is the best one, but so far I haven't evolved

Figure 80
Folder 1092 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
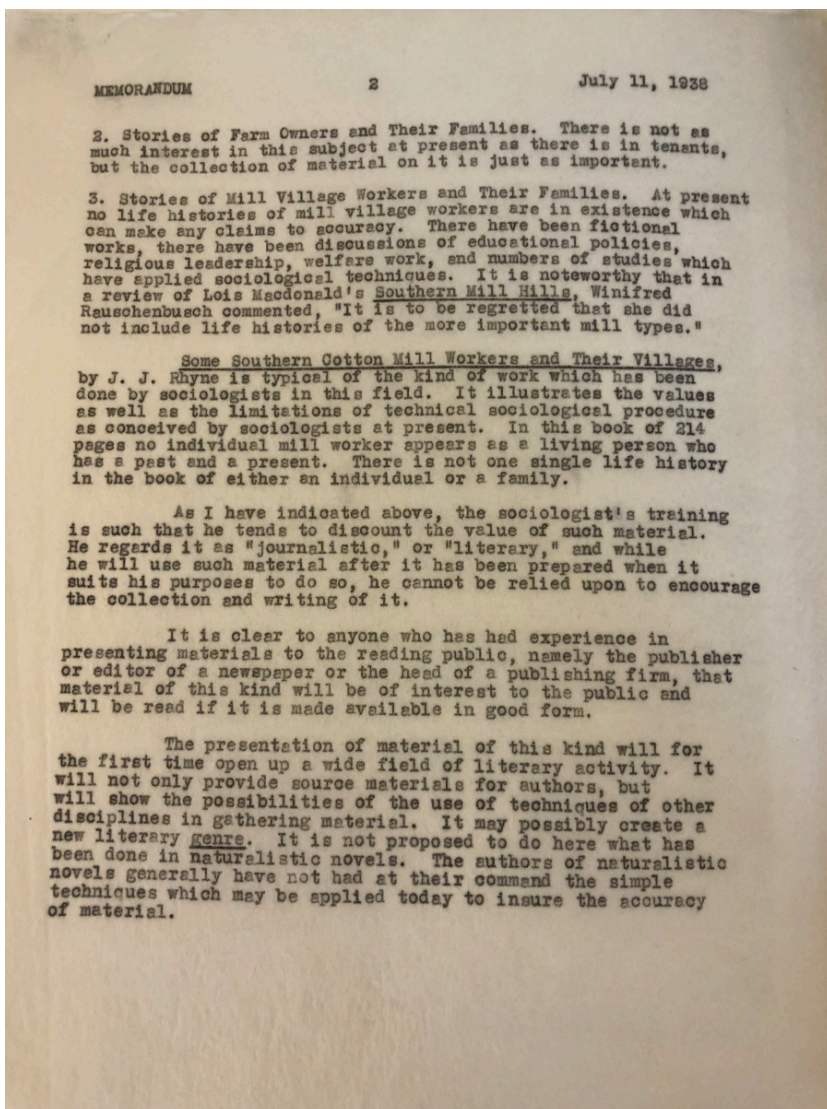
MEMORANDUM   2   July 11, 1938

2. Stories of Farm Owners and Their Families. There is not as much interest in this subject at present as there is in tenants, but the collection of material on it is just as important.

3. Stories of Mill Village Workers and Their Families. At present no life histories of mill village workers are in existence which can make any claims to accuracy. There have been fictional works, there have been discussions of educational policies, religious leadership, welfare work, and numbers of studies which have applied sociological techniques. It is noteworthy that in a review of Lois Macdonald's Southern Mill Hills, Winifred Rauschenbusch commented, "It is to be regretted that she did not include life histories of the more important mill types."

Some Southern Cotton Mill Workers and Their Villages, by J. J. Rhyne is typical of the kind of work which has been done by sociologists in this field. It illustrates the values as well as the limitations of technical sociological procedure as conceived by sociologists at present. In this book of 214 pages no individual mill worker appears as a living person who has a past and a present. There is not one single life history in the book of either an individual or a family.

As I have indicated above, the sociologist's training is such that he tends to discount the value of such material. He regards it as "journalistic," or "literary," and while he will use such material after it has been prepared when it suits his purposes to do so, he cannot be relied upon to encourage the collection and writing of it.

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.

The presentation of material of this kind will for the first time open up a wide field of literary activity. It will not only provide source materials for authors, but will show the possibilities of the use of techniques of other disciplines in gathering material. It may possibly create a new literary genre. It is not proposed to do here what has been done in naturalistic novels. The authors of naturalistic novels generally have not had at their command the simple techniques which may be applied today to insure the accuracy of material.

Figure 81
Folder 1087 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Taylor Arnold · Courtney Rivard · Lauren Tilton

Layered Lives
Rhetoric and Representation in the Southern Life History Project

The Southern Life History Project, a Federal Writers' Project initiative, put unemployed writers to work during the Great Depression by capturing the stories of everyday people across the Southeast through a new form of social documentation called "life histories."

Layered Lives recovers the history of the Southern Life History Project (SLHP) through an interdisciplinary approach that combines close readings of archival material with computational methods that analyze the collection at scale. The authors grapple with the challenges of what counts as social knowledge, how to accurately represent social conditions, who could produce such knowledge, and who is and is not represented. Embedded within such debates are also struggles 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 problems and promises that shaped the SLHP still shape how we capture and share stories today.

Revelatory. The combination of established and new methodologies forces us to rethink what we thought we knew about the archive and gives us fresh ways to see evidence.
Wesley Hogan, Duke University

A thoughtful, important history and a genius conceptualization of how writers interpreted and portrayed lives, using topic modeling, metadata analysis, and close reading.
Sarah Gardner, Mercer University

Demonstrating the power of computational text and geospatial analysis, this remarkable project reveals how race and gender shaped the creation of Southern Life Histories and impacted our ability to understand the lives humanities scholars seek to investigate.
Sharon Leon, Michigan State University