How Do Race and Education Influence the Use of Dialect in the SLHP?  
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Background
As part of the New Deal program during the Great Depression, the Federal Writers’ Project was launched by the federal government’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) to provide jobs for unemployed writers. One of the subprojects within the Federal Writer’s project was the Southern Life Histories Project (SLHP), an effort led by W.T. Couch with the intention of faithfully representing southern society. This collection encompasses documented life histories of about 1,200 individuals across the South, written by about 60 project members.

Our data reveals that written dialect was used more frequently in the histories of black interviewees without formal education as compared to white interviewees without formal education. This disparity is likely the result of racialized thinking and prejudices of the writers during this time period.

Methods
We constructed metadata of writer and interviewee demographics from 234 life histories. We used Tableau to create data visualizations and “help render visible archival silences implicit in” this collection. Next, we conducted textual analysis using Pandas written on Python code to make data frames analyzing word frequency of different subsets.

Significance
Despite white interviewees without formal education outnumbering black interviewees 22 to 14, we found that dialect was used uniquely, and overwhelmingly, in the histories of black interviewees without formal education. This demonstrates that racial identity had a larger influence than education on dialect use and reveals how racialized thinking and prejudices during this time strongly influenced writing. Evidence suggests that Federal Writers may have altered the interviews to overuse dialect speech for black interviewees “because it did not conform to White notions... of proper race relations.” Therefore, the frequent use of these dialectic words signifies the biased choice of the writer to present black interviewees as a lower status group to a general audience, regardless of education, thereby creating a racialized image.

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Figure 1: Word Frequency Shows Popular Use of Dialect For All Interviewees with No Formal Education

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Figure 1 shows the 10 most frequently used words in the life histories of uneducated interviewees.

Figure 2 depicts the 10 most frequently used words in the life histories of black interviewees.

Figure 3 displays the 10 most frequently used words in the histories of white interviewees.

Conclusions
Our findings confirm critiques by scholars that writers potentially interjected bias. From this conclusion, scholars should keep these inequities in mind when analyzing life histories. To further investigate how author prejudices affect choices in writing style, we would like to explore how other demographics influence dialect, such as occupation and geographic location.

Sources