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Front Matter

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Mission

We understand “community literacy” as the domain for literacy work that exists outside of mainstream educational and work institutions. It can be found in programs devoted to adult education, early childhood education, reading initiatives, lifelong learning, workplace literacy, or work with marginalized populations, but it can also be found in more informal, *ad hoc* projects.

For us, literacy is defined as the realm where attention is paid not just to content or to knowledge but to the symbolic means by which it is represented and used. Thus, literacy makes reference not just to letters and to text but to other multimodal and technological representations as well. We publish work that contributes to the field’s emerging methodologies and research agendas.

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Cover Image

Norris Community Club (circa 1975), Commerce, Texas
Source: Commerce Public Library, Local History Collection

In 1973, the Norris Community Club (NCC) was established by university students in partnership with local citizens to provide what they called “a clear channel of communication” between residents of Norris, the historically segregated neighborhood in town, and the City of Commerce. In a few short years, NCC ushered in unprecedented change. The cover image selected for this collection on Writing Democracy serves as a powerful reminder of the very real, very concrete impact university-community partnerships can have. Soon after this photograph was taken, founding members like MacArthur Evans, Larry Mathis, and Allen Hallmark graduated and moved on to their new lives in far East Texas, Colorado, and Oregon. They never forgot the experience, and community leaders in Norris never forgot them. The conference provided the opportunity to bring them together for the first time in nearly 35 years. For an extended discussion of NCC, please see Carter’s “A Clear Channel” in this volume.

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The peer-reviewed *Community Literacy Journal* seeks contributions for upcoming issues. We welcome submissions that address social, cultural, rhetorical, or institutional aspects of community literacy; we particularly welcome pieces authored in collaboration with community partners.

Manuscripts should be submitted according to the standards of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (New York: MLA).

Shorter and longer pieces are acceptable (8–25 manuscript pages) depending on authors' approaches. Case studies, reflective pieces, scholarly articles, etc., are all welcome.

To submit manuscripts, visit our site—communityliteracy.org—and register as an author. Send queries to Michael Moore: mmoore46@depaul.edu.

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Writing Democracy: Notes on a Federal Writers' Project for the 21st Century

Shannon Carter and Deborah Mutnick

A general overview of the Writing Democracy project, including its origin story and key objectives. Draws parallels between the historical context that gave rise to the New Deal's Federal Writers' Project and today, examining the potential for a reprise of the FWP in community literacy and public rhetoric and introducing articles collected in this special issue as responses to the key challenges such a reprisal might raise.

One thread of a story that explains the genesis of this special issue of *Community Literacy Journal* dates back to October 17, 2008, the start of the worst economic crash in seventy-five years. An eerie pall settled over the country as the subprime mortgage debacle unfolded and hardworking people lost their jobs and watched their retirement funds dissipate. Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* gained sudden favor among Wall Street analysts looking for answers to what many observers predicted—at least for a while—might be a total collapse of capitalism. Another thread of the story dates back to October 28, 1929, the mythical, big crash that triggered the Great Depression and the New Deal. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) put millions of people without jobs—including artists, musicians, actors, and writers—back to work under Federal One. The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) employed more than 6,500 workers nationwide, some like Richard Wright, Zora Neal Hurston, and Studs Terkl who went on to become literary luminaries but also many—the vast majority—who were secretaries, students, lawyers, teachers, and clerks.

The third thread is an idea that began to circulate in late 2008 and early 2009 about trying to revive the WPA. Mark Pinsky, a former writer for the *Orlando Sentinel*, published a piece in *The New Republic*, titled "Write Now: Why Barack Obama Should Resurrect the Federal Writers' Project and Bail Out Laid-off Journalists." In addition to getting picked up by National Public Radio, Pinsky's call circulated on the Internet as Congress was debating the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Obama's stimulus package. Artists, progressive critics, and Washington policymakers discussed the idea of reviving the back-to-work programs of the 1930s that had not only provided a lifeline to the unemployed but had also resulted in major infrastructural improvements like bridges and roads and invigorated the arts with federal funding. After one of us had some initial conversations with representatives from the National Council of Teachers of English, who expressed interest but could not commit to a large-scale project, we organized a small, ad-hoc meeting at a Starbucks in Louisville at the 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication. About fifteen conference-goers discussed