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

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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

ways we could push the agenda of a new FWP through existing or new channels. Eventually, with the stimulus package clearly earmarked for other uses, it dawned on us that an already existing infrastructure of university-community partnerships, many led by writing faculty, could serve as the basis for a national project. We agreed to organize our own conference a year hence.

In March 2011, over 150 scholars, students, and community members convened at “Writing Democracy: A Rhetoric of (T)here,” a three-day conference in Commerce, Texas, sponsored by Texas A&M University-Commerce and the Federation Rhetoric Symposium. Seven keynote speakers—five of whose papers we are proud to include in this issue—addressed the theme of existing and possible ways of “writing democracy” in the United States. Shannon hosted a panel discussion with members of the Norris Community Club, a local group organized in 1973 to foster communication between Commerce’s African American residents and university and city officials. (See her article in this issue.) Among the many papers presented were Daylayne Markwardt’s “Composing Democracy: Teaching Genres of Community Action to Collaborate on Understanding Social Problems” and Jeanne Bohannon’s “In Their Own Voices: Literacy, Politics, and the Experiences of the Underrepresented.” Participants included many from rhetoric and writing studies, but also a number of public and university librarians, local and academic historians, and community activists. Throughout the three days, we heard repeatedly how grateful attendees were to participate in a forum on ways composition studies could take up the pressing issues of income inequality, poverty, racism, and xenophobia—all issues that the FWP had wrestled with in 1935 as they sought to “introduce America to Americans” and “rediscover” our national identity at a time when Jim Crow was on the rise, nearly a third of the country was unemployed, and strict immigration quotas had been recently legislated. Sound familiar?

A Primer on the FWP

The Federal Writers’ Project is not widely remembered today, despite having gained critical acclaim in the 1930s and presciently re-envisioned America as a more pluralistic, inclusive society. In addition to serving as a training ground for numerous, important American writers, including several of color, the FWP broke new ground in documenting American life and left a rich legacy of state guides or Baedekers called the *American Guide Series*, oral histories including 2,000 narratives of the last generation of ex-slaves, and searching, ethnographic evocations of everyday life. Yet its reputation faded soon after its final demise in 1943 as a combined result of the national focus on the war effort and persistent accusations of communist infiltration by Texas Congressman Martin Dies, head of the House Un-American Activities Committee, known then as the Dies Committee. Additionally, writers associated with the FWP who went on to gain widespread recognition either eschewed their FWP connection or simply failed to include it in their resumes, perhaps because of the anonymity of the publications or the shame associated with having been on the dole.

Familiarity with the FWP may be on the rise due to the ongoing digitization of thousands of FWP documents made available by the Library of Congress and

other repositories as well as the publication of recent books such as historian and conference keynote speaker Jerrold Hirsch’s *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project*—see his essay in this special issue—and release of films like Andrea Kalin and David Taylor’s *Soul of a People: Writing America’s Story* and Ed Bell and Thomas Lennon’s *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives*. Nevertheless, anecdotally, as we continue to explore the potential for a 21st century FWP, we find ourselves repeatedly explaining the precedent for it. Perhaps it is this repeated narration of the Federal Writers’ Project’s scope and significance that leads us increasingly to see it as a truly remarkable, still largely unmined trove of cultural and social history providing a unique, democratic model for the kind of deliberative public engagement, inquiry, and communication many of us see as a central to our mission as educators.

A Confluence of Forces and Events: One World, One Pain

When we arrived in Commerce in March 2011, the conference was buzzing with conversations about several dramatic events that had transpired since that January: Congresswoman Gabriella Giffords’ tragic shooting followed by earnest national calls for civic dialogue and bipartisanship; the groundswell of resistance to political tyranny in the Middle East in what quickly became known as the Arab Spring; and a tumultuous series of events in Wisconsin as working people across the state, along with Democratic elected officials, stood up to protest Governor Scott Walker’s attack on collective bargaining rights. With social media playing an ever more critical role in organizing grassroots movements globally, it was not surprising when we clicked open a viral photograph of an Egyptian protester with a sign reading, “Egyptians Support Wisconsin: One World, One Pain.”

Then, as if to remind us of the seriousness of the questions we were raising, as the March 2011 conference in Commerce was ending, the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant, destabilized by a massive earthquake and tsunami, experienced the worst meltdown since the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. Bearing witness to yet another nuclear disaster, devastating to the Japanese people and a grim threat to an increasingly fragile planet, gave us a case in point of the premise of our project, “writing democracy,” supporting the idea that history itself is authored, determined at least to some extent by human agency—decisions, policies, plans, actions. As Nancy Welch—another conference keynote speaker—observes in her essay “Informed, Passionate, and Disorderly: Uncivil Rhetoric in a New Gilded Age” in this special issue, militant protests that summer at the Indian Point nuclear power plant in Buchanan, New York, drew criticism from a highly regarded anti-nuclear activist for being “completely disorderly” (34). Welch’s point is not only that this denunciation of the protesters was a deliberate attempt to influence the outcome of another scheduled National Regulatory Commission presentation in Vermont by quelling dissent but also that the speaker, who had not been present at the Indian Point meeting, had been contacted directly and manipulated by the NRC unbeknownst to the public.

Thus we note both our capacity to “write” history and “revise” our present course, and also the powerful forces historically arrayed against those who aim to do so under the banner, broadly speaking, of placing human need before profit. That

this is a large, diverse amalgam of groups and individuals, with multiple, contested points of view makes deep structural social change a complicated, messy process. That process is further derailed by the dominant culture's strategic exercise of power, overtly through military might and covertly through what Antonio Gramsci called cultural hegemony—a form of domination in which a ruling class convinces the rest of us that we benefit by social arrangements presented as universal, normal, and natural. The Fukushima disaster was clearly not outside the control of human beings but rather the consequence of policy decisions that are neither inevitable nor immutable. For us at our small conference of community members, graduate students, and professors, the momentous events that winter and the Fukushima meltdown on our last day together served almost uncannily to reinforce our sense of the urgency, however quixotic, of our growing band of scholars, teachers, students, and community members “writing democracy.”

Add one more surprising phenomenon to the events of 2011 that retroactively inform the conference theme: Occupy Wall Street. Who could have anticipated half a year earlier in March the self-described “people-powered movement” inspired by the protests in Tunisia and Egypt that first occupied Zuccotti Park, also known as Liberty Square, on September 17? Although the momentum of OWS slowed considerably over the winter, this national uprising of the 99% “daring to imagine a new socio-political and economic alternative that offers greater possibility of equality” spread to over one hundred cities across the country and got front page media coverage for months. Whatever the future of OWS may be, its very emergence, its brilliant identification as the 99%, its remarkably fast spreading influence, and its ability to reach across many sectors, including organized labor, demonstrates the latent power of mass collective struggle.

Add, too, one caveat: we have no illusions about the role that “Writing Democracy/FWP 2.0” would or could play in any movement for social change. What we are proposing is a cultural project, which we hope is inclusive, broad, and appealing to students, teachers, scholars, community members, and the general public. Its character is yet to be determined and can only be shaped by those who respond to calls for its creation and the historical context that gave rise to those calls. Like the 1930s' FWP, the one we envision would document cultural and social history through writing about places, communities, and people, and, like its precursor, it would train a corps of writers drawn from the ranks of college students, community members, and ordinary people to tell their own and each other's stories, and once again, some 75 years later, redefine who we are as a country through local guides, oral histories, and now, web-based, multimedia compositions.

Public Writing in the Era of Neoliberalism

The “public turn” in composition studies has taken myriad forms, from service learning and community literacy projects to more traditional letters to the editor and op-editorials (see, e.g., Wells; Herzberg; Weisser; Faigley; Trimbur). Reflective of the field's search for its own identity, the turn to public writing emanates from a widely shared conviction that higher education should prepare students to participate fully in public life, and that literacy skills and knowledge are a prerequisite for such

engagement. Yet the obstacles to public writing can be formidable: students' lack of preparedness; the complications of developing and sustaining relationships with community partners; the “do-good” ethos of many service learning programs; the asymmetrical power dynamics that typically define university-community relations; and the illusiveness of the public sphere in a highly stratified, commodified, fragmented society, just to name a few.

Nonetheless, the public turn can be seen in a growing number of university-community partnerships and exercises in civic engagement across the disciplines, including the field of composition. This trend is evinced in four of the essays by our contributors—Michelle Hall Kells, Elenore Long (coauthored by Nyillian Fye and John Jarvis), David Jolliffe, and Shannon Carter—as well as the work of national organizations like Campus Compact, Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, and the Kettering Foundation. We see Writing Democracy/FWP 2.0 in this context as well as in response to—or anticipation of—broader, national calls for higher education to return to its larger, public, democratic mission.

These high-level appeals came in January 2012 from the Department of Education and the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, which simultaneously released reports calling for higher education “to reclaim and reinvest in [its] fundamental civic and democratic mission.” Such calls echo the visions of American democracy that have guided and troubled the U.S. since its inception—guided its promises to enact the values of equality, freedom, and human rights inherited from the European Enlightenment, and troubled its genocidal, racist, xenophobic, anti-labor, profit-driven policies and practices starting with the decimation of the native people whose cultures were destroyed and whose lands were robbed. The calls also come at a moment of extreme income inequality not seen since the Gilded Age, a long global recession that continues to impoverish and deracinate masses of people, and the still ongoing U.S. war in Afghanistan, by far the longest in our history.

Clearly, this crisis regarding the role of higher education in a democracy informed the authors of the National Task Force report entitled “A Crucible Moment” who self-consciously cite the Truman Commission on Higher Education as a source of inspiration for having spurred the development of free, community colleges and “foregrounded democracy as the force for driving higher education's transformation and leadership, and with it, the nation's course toward justice for all” (National 18). We applaud their emphasis on civil rights and other social movements for justice and socioeconomic equality, and we hope to join their efforts to revitalize civic education and rebuild a participatory democracy. However, we also note the report's internal contradictions: this appeal to refocus the nation's attention on democracy and “justice for all” is invited and sanctioned by a government which has led or been complicit in subverting and in some cases destroying precisely those social justice movements at home and abroad cited as exemplary models of democratic engagement.

Nor is this history behind us; current neoliberal policies of austerity, deregulation, privatization, and militarization evident at home and abroad have served to demobilize and demoralize precisely the kind of civic engagement the report endorses, leading to what David Mathews, cited by the National Task Force report, describes as a “citizenless democracy.” Notwithstanding the Task Force's

rhetorical commitment to civic engagement and democratic processes, and its praise for popular movements for democracy like the Arab Spring elsewhere in the world, it ignores the largest, fastest-growing mass movement in this country, Occupy Wall Street, despite the fact that not two months prior to the report's release, OWS protesters at the University of California at Davis were severely pepper sprayed by campus police.

As UC Davis music professor Bob Ostertag wrote in the Huffington Post, "To begin with, the chancellor could have thanked them for their sense of civic duty. The occupation could have been turned into a teach-in on the role of public education in this country. There could have been a call for professors to hold classes on the quad. The list of 'other options' is endless." The police response to the OWS protests raging across the country from mid-September through December epitomizes the contradiction between grassroots, democratic engagement that leads to social change because it forces those in power to push through divisive laws on the one hand, and academic forums for civic engagement that set out to teach people how to participate in democracy on the other. The one rises up from popular resistance; the other is all too often pedantic and unresponsive if not hostile to community needs, identities, and aspirations.

While the two forms of engagement are clearly not mutually exclusive—and we sincerely agree that the sphere of education can be a critical space for learning about history, politics, government, and the deliberative skills and strategies that enable participation in the public sphere—it seems to us that frequently we in the academy have more to learn from than to teach community members and social justice organizers. Local officials and police attacked the students who sat in at racially segregated lunch counters in the 1960s, and federal support only came late and provisionally. The impact of service learning—restricted in its political reach by academic proprieties and often set up strictly for the convenience of the student, shoehorned into two seventy-five-minute class periods for fourteen or so weeks—pales by comparison.

Thus we envision Writing Democracy/FWP 2.0 as a project that will not only encourage writing in communities responsive to local needs—and communities that recognize and relate to the colleges and universities within them—but also analysis of our era's central contradiction between popular aspirations for socioeconomic justice and the relentless drive for power and profits. This contradiction has been deepened by decades of a particularly inhumane form of neoliberal capitalism. We see its critical interrogation as central to the goals of "writing democracy," and in so doing we anticipate disagreement and debate as we drill deeper into what we mean by the very term "democracy." We assume that the authors of "A Crucible Moment" understand this contradiction, too, just as we recognize the value of forging alliances across all sectors of society. We also hope they will listen to the conversations their report provokes and invite the participation of diverse academic, community, and grassroots organizations in the implementation of their mission. In the meantime, we wonder how civic engagement might be organized in response to what Dwight D. Eisenhower famously dubbed the "military industrial complex" more than 50 years ago, warning against its unfettered growth, and might now be renamed in this

era of hedge funds, venture capital, and derivatives the "military industrial financial complex."

Writing Democracy/FWP 2.0

Following the March 2011 conference in Commerce, we co-facilitated a CCCC workshop on "Writing Democracy 2012: Envisioning a Federal Writers' Project for the 21st Century" in St. Louis. At the workshop, Jerrold Hirsch's brief history of the FWP's achievements and impediments, in conversation with more contemporary initiatives like the National Coalition of Writing Across Communities (Brian Hendrickson, University of New Mexico) and the Center for Everyday Writing at Florida State University (Kathleen Blake Yancey), helped ground our exploration of the potential forms our project might take. Steve Parks of Syracuse University reminded us of the popular appeal of such projects, drawing our attention to the Federation of Worker Writers & Community Publishers in Great Britain and current community publishing ventures in neighborhoods surrounding Syracuse, New York. Laurie Grobman of Penn State Berks and Catherine Hobbs of the University of Oklahoma emphasized the role of local history in their pedagogical and scholarly projects, as well as the complexities of capturing and publishing that history: Grobman focused on her ongoing community publishing with students in partnership with a local chapter of NAACP, the Jewish Heritage Center, and the Hispanic Heritage Center, while Hobbs described her ongoing study of a writer for the FWP and her attempts to capture Native American history for the Oklahoma State Guide in the 1930s.

All of these perspectives came together for us when Jeff Grabill from Michigan State University reflected on creating a public in response to specific events or calls to action, which helped situate the project in concrete, historical terms. Drawing on John Dewey's defense of participatory democracy in *The Public and Its Problems*, Grabill eloquently argued that the "public" we might engage in FWP 2.0 will only emerge, if at all, in the process of an evolving conversation calling it into being. We were struck in particular by the difficulty of defining the very idea of "writing democracy." What, after all, might that mean in practical and political terms? In all of the "turns" academe has taken in the last fifty years, we notice the absence of a "political turn," which we now see as imperative in response to the dire socioeconomic, environmental, and humanitarian exigencies of our times. Like the National Task Force, we see higher education as playing a critical role not only in teaching historical, civic, rhetorical, information, and critical literacy—summed up pithily by what Mary Louise Pratt called "the arts of the contact zone"—but also in joining forces with local communities and emerging social movements, and supporting their efforts to rebuild and retool for a more equitable, just, democratic, environmentally sustainable society. To that end, we proposed a full-day workshop at CCCC 2013 in Las Vegas called "The Political Turn: Writing 'Democracy' in the 21st Century."

Along with a series of panels theorizing what we mean by "democracy," featuring Kurt Spellmeyer, Carmen Kynard, and Nancy Welch, we will be joined by John Carlos, the Olympic athlete renowned for having raised his fist in a black

power salute at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. A former student of what was then East Texas State University—the institution where Shannon teaches and where, significantly, the first Writing Democracy conference was held—Carlos will be a featured CCCC speaker in Las Vegas (for more on Carlos at ETSU in 1966-67, see Shannon's article). Also planned is a web- and video-based project titled "This We Believe," launching Writing Democracy/FWP 2.0 and giving a more collective spin to Edward R. Murrow's "This I Believe" (revived in 2004 by NPR) as a means of eliciting broader participation—an emerging public—at the conference and beyond.

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This special issue of the CLJ serves as an opening gambit in developing a theoretical, historical, and practical framework for "writing democracy." We take the unexpectedly large number of submissions and the many interesting community projects we got a chance to read about as a sign of FWP 2.0's potential, and we thank the many authors whose excellent work we could not include due to the limits of space. Divided into three sections—Historical and Theoretical Frameworks, Global/Local Communities, and Civic Engagement—the five articles that follow dovetail in various ways with our sense of the FWP as a prototype for a new national or even international writing project. Our intent is to put the authors in dialogue with each other about the history of the 1930s project in relation to a "public turn" evident across the disciplines and all the issues it has raised so as to probe more deeply into the goals, methods, and forms a 21st century FWP might take.

In Part I: Historical and Theoretical Frameworks, we start with historian Jerrold Hirsch's "Rediscovering America: The FWP Legacy and Challenge," which returns us to our original inspiration for Writing Democracy/FWP 2.0, connecting the historical and cultural dots between 1935 and 2012 as only someone whose own life's work has been profoundly affected by study of the Federal Writers' Project could do. By incorporating his reflections on both the 2011 Writing Democracy conference and the 2012 CCCC workshop, Hirsch helps us think through what a contemporary FWP might achieve as well as some of the pitfalls to bear in mind. He returns again and again to the trope of "the perpetual rediscovery of America" (16, 18, 29), with all of its problematic associations including early stages of exploration and conquest, because, alas, the question of who is an American remains as—if not more—troubling now as it was in the 1930s. Hirsch asks: "Who today are our submerged classes?" (19). Lacing his overview of the history of the FWP with his own "le petite histoire," as he puts it, Hirsch hits on critical reference points for our vision of what the project might look like today: the 1930s' FWP's cross-disciplinary integration of literature and history; the rejection of strict divisions between high and low culture; and the bottom-up approach to history that had begun profoundly to influence the discipline of history by the 1970s, embracing previously excluded groups, and gave rise to new sub-disciplines of oral history and public history.

Also essential to applying the lessons of the FWP to a contemporary landscape is a theoretical analysis of class dynamics. In her essay, "Informed, Passionate, and Disorderly: Uncivil Rhetoric for a New Gilded Age," Nancy Welch analyzes how a ruling class maintains power and perpetuates social inequalities by veiling its own crass, self-serving political and economic interests with the language of reason, order, justice, and democracy. Welch unpacks the rhetoric of civility as serving all

too frequently to silence debate and "curtail rhetorical spaciousness" (36), especially noticeable in an era of privatization leading to increasingly fewer public spaces and more limited access to political decision making. Along with telling current examples of how this "wooly rhetoric" is being used to suppress dissent and advance a neoliberal agenda, Welch recounts denunciations of "incivility" by some of the era's progressive reformers of the Bread and Roses strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912 to illustrate "how a civil order may be defended not for the good of democracy but against it" (38).

In Part II: Global/Local Communities, Elenore Long, Nyllian Fye, and John Jarvis provide a version of the kind of project FWP 2.0 might support in their exploration of the intersection of the global and the local in "Gambian-American College Writers Flip the Script on Aid-to-Africa Discourse." The authors examine the discourse of aid to Africa in light of the fourth annual Miss Gambia-USA Pageant in 2009, an event hosted by Fye and other Gambian-American students to raise funds for girls' education in the Gambia. Invoking Michael Warner's term, "stranger-relationality"—the social structures that govern relations between self and other—they examine how "rhetors call together a public to address issues of shared concern" when the dominant culture negates the agency of those most affected, in this case, by aid to Africa. By staging the pageant, the Gambian students "disrupted self-other norms toward international aid and activism," exemplifying the rhetorical agency and activity of those outside dominant cultural institutions.

For Fye and her colleagues, the question was not so much whether the fashion show objectified the female body—undercut in any case by the pageant's down-to-earth, critically conscious presentations by female students and supportive, entertaining participation by male Gambian students—as it was "what's an available cultural form" to use for the purposes of raising funds for girls' education in the Gambia. In "flipping the script" on noblesse oblige, celebrity refeudalism, and neoliberal economics—the three types of dehumanizing, "doer-done" stranger-relationality they argue commonly structure aid to Africa—the pageant "invented discursive space" to "co-construct" or "name" "the terms of a yet uncharted future" (55, 63). Such self-sponsored literacy, according to the authors, is the point: "[C]ollege writers like Fye have a lot to teach those of us who teach rhetoric about this highly inventive public discourse that is taking place with or without us" (54).

David A. Jolliffe turns to more local concerns in rural Arkansas in his essay, "Shakespeare and the Cultural Capital Tension: Advancing Literacy in Rural Arkansas." While Jolliffe admits that his own fervent desire to "embed" literacy in community life and thereby "equalize people's chances to live freely and pursue happiness" (77) might subject him to a Bourdieuan critique for having imposed his cultural values on rural, east central Arkansas, his exuberant story of literacy's role in rebuilding an economically depressed community suggests otherwise. The reasons for the economic decline, though slightly different in rural Arkansas, are familiar: an interstate highway that sapped economic vitality from local businesses and the transformation of family farms to big, highly mechanized, globalized agribusinesses.

The demographic data portray widespread job loss and poverty combined with low levels of education, producing "a cycle of decline" exacerbated by the discourse of deficit typically used to describe it. In part because the Augusta Recovery

Initiative had already decided that education rather than jobs per se was the key to economic development, Jolliffe's proposal for a community literacy initiative was enthusiastically embraced, giving birth to the Augusta Community Literacy Advocacy Project. Among other measures of its success, this project has given rise to the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project, the ARCare Shakespeare Festival reviving a century's old tradition of performing the bard's work in rural places—this past year, *The Tempest*—and the Augusta Veterans' Stories Project. For Jolliffe, the takeaway is twofold: widespread community involvement and recognition and celebration of each and everyone's achievements.

Finally, in Part III: Civic Engagement, we conclude with additional channels for FWP 2.0 suggested by university-community projects closely tied to scholarly research. In "What's Writing Got to Do with It? Citizen Wisdom, Civil Rights Activism, and 21st Century Community Literacy," Michelle Hall Kells theorizes principles for community literacy through the lens of the twentieth century Mexican American civil rights movement. Following up on her book-length study of everyday rhetoric in the life of Mexican American civil rights leader Hector P. Garcia, she examines two rhetorical events—a letter-to-the-editor of the *Albuquerque Journal* and a telegram protesting the actions of a local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution—in the life of Garcia's friend, Vicente Ximenes, who held several strategic positions, including Chairman of the American GI Forum in New Mexico and Commissioner of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission under President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Kells argues that the letter and telegram represent Ximenes' pragmatic approach to community organizing and his enactment of precisely the kind of community literacy practices she and her colleagues in the Writing Across Communities initiative at the University of New Mexico and the ABQ Community Literacy Center hope to accomplish: "a platform for invigorating the public sphere and cultivating civic literacy among our most vulnerable communities—creating spaces for historically excluded peoples" (99). Her exposition of dissent, deliberation, dissonance, and disputation—what she calls the "four dimensions of democratic discourse"—in relation to Ximenes' work reveals the complex rhetorical exigencies involved in struggling for civil rights within the constraints of post-World War II social realities in New Mexico.

Similarly, in "A Clear Channel: Circulating Resistance in a Rural University Town," Shannon Carter demonstrates what we can learn from public writing generated for and by communities organizing on their own behalf. Like Kells and Welch in the current issue, Carter turns to historical examples of civic engagement, in this case two local efforts to challenge racial injustice in a rural university town—both initiated by African American students, one in 1967, the other in 1973—and both with important implications for contemporary projects like *Writing Democracy*. In 1967, a year before his heroic, silent protest against racism with Tommie Smith at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, then East Texas State University student John Carlos loudly protested the racism he felt as a young black man transplanted from Harlem to an East Texas he found unbearably racist and inhospitable. But while many locals—black and white—agreed with his characterizations of segregation's ongoing

challenges, Carlos could not mobilize even minimal local support. Frustrated, he left ET in 1967, going on to stage his dramatic protest at the Olympics the following year.

Five years later in 1973, the Norris Community Club (NCC)—a university-community partnership with deep local roots—was established to provide what NCC organizers called a "clear channel of communication" between residents of Norris, the town's historically segregated neighborhood, and the rest of the city. Because student populations are transient by nature and racism is not a "curable aberration" but rather institutionalized, systemic, and seemingly intractable, civil rights secured by NCC—and the organization as such—began to lose ground as the involved student leadership graduated and city leadership shifted priorities. In addition to instantiating "writing democracy" in a chapter of local history, Carter demonstrates how this university-community partnership ultimately reemerged through the very act of rhetorical recovery and strategic use of public programming, providing again the "clear channel" needed for democratic deliberation and suggesting, by example, the role *Writing Democracy/FWP 2.0* might play in providing "a clear channel" for local publics linked together across the nation still struggling to understand America(ns) today.

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What would a new FWP look like? In his article, Hirsch suggests an agenda that would, among other things: 1) address the tensions between writers and the communities they document; 2) draw on the travel/tourism motif suggested by the state guides but avoid their inherent commercialism; and 3) develop and implement a theory of shared authority among all the stakeholders. Toward that end we hope to continue to expand the conversation we started in 2010, engaging with like-minded local, national, and even international initiatives. Although a full conceptualization of a 21st century FWP will need to be collectively determined, we invite feedback to this issue's delineation of historical and contemporary efforts that we think map out the road ahead. Along with oral history, cultural guides, and folklore projects, FWP 2.0 might also digitize archives, making them available to the public, and use geo-mapping, digital movies, and social media tools to develop interactive sites and disseminate stories. Obviously, technology will transform FWP 2.0 with a Web-based platform accessible to communities across the country if not the world. As we swap local stories in a more global context, we hope, too, to deepen discussions about democracy. Like the original FWP, we will surely encounter conflicting points of view and, most likely, some hostile responses along the way. But a new FWP could also give rise to a new cadre of writers and unify already existing projects that could help "write democracy" as we document everyday life at a critical turning point of world history.

For more information on the current project, see www.writingdemocracy.org

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The Writing Democracy Project: Next Steps

We are committed to providing regular opportunities to continue the conversations represented in this special issue. To that end, we share two opportunities to join the Writing Democracy Project. “This We Believe/FWP 2.0 Project” is online, ongoing, and will launch with the publication of this special issue. “The Political Turn” is a face-to-face workshop to take place at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Las Vegas, Nevada, in March 2013. Additional details on these and related activities can be found at our project website: writingdemocracy.org.

Rediscovering America: The FWP Legacy and Challenge

Jerrold Hirsch

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This article examines the New Deal’s Federal Writers’ Project’s challenge and legacy to scholars seeking to create an FWP-inspired project today. It explores how scholars in various disciplines engaged in the “public turn,” which has contributed to university-community research and teaching projects, can gain perspective and insight from learning about the FWP’s goals and accomplishments. The article focuses on the FWP’s pluralistic vision of national identity, which led national FWP officials to examine American diversity in encyclopedic guidebooks and through oral history, ethnic, and folklore studies. By exploring why the work of the FWP was ignored for a long time and how its vision and work gradually reemerged, I seek not only to provide a history of the FWPs reputation but also to shed light on the opportunities and responsibilities the FWP offers to current efforts to create new FWP-like projects for a new time.

I always thought my research on the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) was relevant in the broadest sense of that term. Then in the beginning of 2009, in the midst of the high expectations many Americans had for the Obama presidency, and during the severe economic recession of the time that faced the nation, I learned that the FWP was not only relevant but also topical to a degree I had never anticipated. Robin Pogrebin reported in the *New York Times* in early 2009 that “The challenge for culture boosters in Congress was to convince a House-Senate conference committee that the arts provide jobs as other industries do, while also encouraging tourism and spending in general.” This echoed the very ideas and language that supporters of the FWP and the New Deal Arts Project used to gain public and congressional support for a New Deal program in the 1930s that employed at its height 6,500 workers.

Ideas and debates about government, the arts, and work relief for artists that had not taken place in over seventy years were recurring after Obama’s election. The question remains how deep this discussion can become, although it is now clear that the initiatives in this area are very unlikely to come from the Obama administration. Can those involved in university-community research projects draw on the legacy of the New Deal’s Federal Writers’ Project to an FWP-like project that meets the cultural needs of a new time that is both similar to and different from that of the 1930s?

...

When I received an invitation to be a keynote speaker at the “Writing Democracy: A Rhetoric of (T)Here” conference in 2011, I was not only honored, flattered, and delighted, but also I was thinking maybe here was an opportunity to