

Fall 2012

## Next Steps for Writing Democracy

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## Next Steps for Writing Democracy

### *The Political Turn: Writing “Democracy” for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

**This workshop extends a conversation about the 1930s Federal Writers’ Project begun in 2011 and continued at CCCC 2012 to focus specifically on defining what we mean by the term “democracy.”**

Over the past fifty years, we have seen a “linguistic turn,” a “social turn,” and a “public turn.” In this moment of mounting, worldwide economic, environmental, and cultural uncertainty, we submit that it is time for a “political turn.” Despite some indications of a slow recovery from the crash in 2008, the U.S. continues to face mounting household and student debt, foreclosures, and long-term unemployment. The richest 1% own a third of the nation’s net worth; income of the 24 million least wealthy Americans decreased by 10% in 2010; and one in every 7 Americans lives below the poverty line (*Guardian* 11/16/11). It is this gross economic inequality that gave rise to the Occupy Wall Street movement in September 2011 and its powerful slogan, “We are the 99%.” In the environmental arena, we have born witness to the effects of climate change and the persistence of unscientific political discourse about it; the threat of nuclear disasters like the explosion at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant in March 2011; and the impact of market-driven energy policies and procedures like hydro-fracking. And on the cultural front, we live in a period most acutely marked perhaps by the fact that incarcerated people in the U.S. represent 25% of the world’s prisoners and of those 70% are nonwhite. According to Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, “more African Americans [are] under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.”

At CCCC 2012, we held a workshop on the relevance of the 1930s Federal Writers’ Project to contemporary college writing programs, service-learning programs, and scholars across the country engaged in university-community partnerships. We continued earlier explorations begun at the 2011 Writing Democracy conference at Texas A&M-Commerce to explore how together these programs might create a roadmap for rediscovering 21<sup>st</sup> century America with FWP 2.0, using some of the same tools of ethnography, state or local guides, oral history, and folklore used by the federal writers during the Great Depression. Among the contributions at the CCCC 2012 workshop were Jeff Grabill’s commentary on the relevance of John Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems* to thinking through the rhetorical appeal that gives rise to a public and Steven Parks’ discussion of the publicly funded Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers, a nonprofit organization begun in 1976 in England whose aim is “to increase access to writing and publishing, especially for those who may sometimes find it difficult to be heard in our society.” Historian Jerrold Hirsch, author of *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project*, provided a historical context for the discussion. Kathi Blake Yancey described the Center for Everyday Writing at The Florida State University and Laurie Grobman

discussed her student research projects in Latino, African American, and Jewish communities, all leading to the publication of books.

The proposed 2013 workshop emerges directly from conversations in St. Louis about the FWP as a historical and cultural model. For as productive as those conversations were, they also sparked new areas of concern. It became clear that deeper conversations of what we mean by the term “democracy” and how such a project could go beyond merely linking community-based writing and other university-community partnerships needed to occur. We needed to identify comparable subjects for a reprise in 2012 of the federal writers’ invitation to people whose voices had not been heard in the 1930s—Native Americans, the last generation of ex-slaves, immigrants, and workers—to tell their stories. For this workshop, then, we intend to build an agenda that might begin to serve as today’s equivalent of the FWP’s commitment to democracy, pluralism, and inclusiveness.

The primary goal of the proposed CCCC Workshop, then, is to deepen the conversation about democracy that began in earnest at the 2012 gathering, and thus enact a political turn we believe is necessitated by the current conjuncture as well as our particular project of “writing democracy” and reviving the FWP. Our plan is as follows: During the academic year 2012/2013, we are going to sponsor a disciplinary wide conversation on the meaning of democracy by creating an on-line “This We Believe” website, where teachers and students can submit two minute essays on the connection between writing, writing classrooms, and democracy. These essays will serve as the launching point for our workshop as well as framing devices throughout the day. The day will include three panels featuring Olympic athlete John Carlos, renowned for having raised his fist in a black power salute in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Nancy Welch, Kurt Spellmeyer, and Carmen Kynard. Each panel will help us 1) place the focus on “democracy” into a historical context; and 2) theorize the meaning of democracy in 2013. Additionally, the workshop will use the community organizing methods of Marshall Ganz to enable participants to develop a year-long agenda for FWP 2.0, based upon the earlier panel presentation, along with a series of benchmark goals, to be achieved by C’s 2014.

9:00	Introductions: SC/DM/SP
9:15	<b>Democracy and the Open Hand/Closed Fist</b> Carlos, Carter, Welch (60 Minutes)
10:15	<b>“This We Believe”</b> (45 Minutes)
11:00	Break (15 Minutes)
11:15	<b>Theories of Democratic Writing</b>

Spellmeyer/Mutnick  
(60 Minutes)

12:15 Lunch

1:00 **Democratic Struggle: Writing On Line, Off Campus, and In the Streets**

Kynard, Kuebrich, Parks  
(60 Minutes)

2:00 **Organizing for Change: Afternoon Workshop**

4:30 **Federal Writers Project 2.0 Campaign Plan**  
(30 Minutes)

5:00 Conclusion

#### Participants

##### Co-Chairs:

Deborah Mutnick  
Shannon Carter  
Steve Parks

##### Presenters/Facilitators:

John Carlos  
Carmen Kynard  
Nancy Welch  
Kurt Spellmeyer  
Laurie Grobman  
Brian Bailie  
Ben Kuebrich  
Eli Goldblatt

## Writing Democracy 2012-2013

This We Believe  
A Project of FWP 2.0

Seventy-five years ago during the Great Depression, a division of the Works Progress Administration called the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) employed writers and researchers to create "a new roadmap for the cultural rediscovery of America" via local guidebooks, oral histories, and folklore. Today, college writing programs, service-learning programs, and scholars across the disciplines are engaging in university-community partnerships that might together create a similar roadmap for rediscovering 21st century America.

After the 2008 crash, numerous commentators suggested the idea of a new FWP. Although it became clear by late 2009 that Obama's stimulus package would not fund such a project, the idea inspired a conference, Writing Democracy: A Rhetoric of (T)here, in March 2011 at Texas A&M-Commerce. Over 150 scholars, students, and community members convened to examine concepts of place, local publics, and popular movements in an attempt to understand and promote democracy through research, writing, and action. Since that time, those involved have continued to talk and develop strategies for linking writing to democracy.

"This We Believe" is an attempt to expand and archive those conversations. Over the next year, FWP 2.0—our name for a fledgling 21<sup>st</sup> century Federal Writers' Project—will be reaching out to students, teachers, and everyday citizens asking them to record a short, two-minute response to any of several questions. Their answers will be made available on this site, where others can respond and expand upon the conversation. Ultimately, we hope to take representative conversations and produce a book for use in classrooms across the country—bringing the peoples' concerns and hopes for democracy directly to students. We also hope to host another Writing Democracy Conference in 2013.

We invite you to take a moment and record a response to one of the following questions. Simply visit the "This We Believe" page at [writingdemocracy.org](http://writingdemocracy.org), the select one of the following questions. You will be taken to a page that will allow you either to record or to upload your response.

1. To paraphrase Raymond Carver, "what do we talk about when we talk about democracy"?
2. What does U.S. democracy in 2012 look like to you? How do its realities compare to your dream of democracy in our nation and in our world?
3. How does writing, as cultural work, serve the project of democracy as you've described and dreamed it above? What possibilities does writing hold for helping us to reimagine and reinvigorate U.S. democracy locally and nationally?

4. In this time of growing interconnectedness and economic globalization, what opportunities and challenges face democracy beyond national borders?

We look forward to you joining the conversation.

This We Believe Project Directors

Shannon Carter  
Timothy Dougherty  
Deborah Mutnick  
Steve Parks  
Rachael Shapiro

## Book and New Media Reviews

### From the Review Desk

*Jim Bowman*

St. John Fisher College

As my upper division rhetoric students settled into a service-learning project designed to help develop the communicative capabilities of an organization that provided uninsured and underinsured city residents of Rochester with affordable healthcare, the platitudes flowed easily. They justified the utility of their efforts on safe, ethical grounds. We were “helping those in need” and “supporting a worthy organization.” I worried, though, that our “safe” capacity-building work might be conspiring against a more honest look at what drives the differences in perspectives between comparatively privileged college students and the volunteers, staff, and constituents at the healthcare organization we worked with. After screening and discussing Michael Moore’s polemic documentary *Sicko*, this benign “cover story” began to take on water. The asymmetric experiences that led to different takes on “healthcare literacy” became part of our own complicated class story. I will probably never know whether these more open discussions of perspectival difference had any impact on the students’ work, but I was certainly more confident that our efforts thereafter were done with a great deal more self-awareness of how and why people approach the literacies of healthcare so differently.

In the midst of ambitious community-based projects, educators can sometimes neglect to attend effectively to the different perspectives on literacy held by those in higher education and those in community organizations. The texts and reviews of this edition display this tension productively and explore literacy from many of the diverse positions that inform meaningful collaborations between communities and institutions of higher education. Ben Kuebrich’s keywords essay on “community publishing” provides us with valuable insights into the growth and challenges of writing projects that are ideally driven by the needs of community organizations that represent dynamic, evolving constituencies. He notes, for example, the difficulty in measuring the impact of community-based projects and publishing efforts. Those in higher education can better position themselves to gauge the impact of our efforts when they listen to community partners. As he points out, the news of a project’s impact will not break in our journals but rather in the daily interactions we share with the communities we serve and for whom literacies matter most. *Literacy in Times of Crisis*, edited by Laurie MacGillivray and reviewed by Patricia Burnes, begins from the given assumption that literacy is embedded in social practices. Attention to how moments of crisis demand, produce, disable, or otherwise affect literate activity affords scholars, teachers and community activists insight into the inescapable power of literacy. For language educators of all sorts who are determined to see their efforts empower others, the collection as a whole provides a message both sobering and inspiring. Linda Flower’s *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, reviewed by Christine Martorana, demonstrates how community-oriented academics are at their best when they operate self-reflectively to deploy their own literacy skills