
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

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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?

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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

move beyond the topical flurry of discussion about new government art projects that had not really gone anywhere, and actually accomplish something. Reviewing the FWP as an effort in writing democracy, as part of the seemingly perpetual rediscovery of America, can help us think about a key question the “Writing Democracy” conference organizers posed: [H]ow might something like the Federal Writers’ Project, part of FDR’s New Deal in the 1930s, serve to link all our projects nationwide to tell America’s story today in its local and global contexts as we enter the second decade of the 21st century? (“Writing Democracy”). Useful comparisons can be made between the way national FWP officials as the leaders of a New Deal agency were able to ignore existing academic boundaries that some of the projects they undertook transgressed and the interdisciplinary work being undertaken by some scholars today. And scholars today in various disciplines engaged in university-community research and teaching projects can gain perspective and insight from learning about the FWP’s goals and accomplishments, which by definition were aimed at a public audience and were thus most relevant for the discipline’s current “public turn.”

We can learn from thinking about the FWP experience as we pursue current projects and plan future ones that seek to broaden the discourse in the public sphere about American nationality, culture, and identity. If the work of the FWP was about anything, it was about, “Introducing America to Americans”—the value of trying to understand the subjective experience of other Americans—in order to create communal solidarity not only by accepting but also by embracing and celebrating American diversity in democratic and egalitarian ways.

The guiding vision of the FWP deserves our consideration. Differences and similarities between then and now merit discussion, as do pitfalls and opportunities to build on the philosophy and work of the FWP. The very term “writing” in “writing democracy” deserves special attention in terms of the work the FWP did in oral history and folklore and the work that would need to be done in those areas in any project that sought to build on the work of Federal Writers.¹ Whether we are fully conscious of it or not, the very idea of reviving an FWP-like project brings that new undertaking into the history of the perpetual rediscovery of America.

The idea of rediscovering America was already old when the country was young. National FWP officials talked about the need to rediscover the United States but they were hardly the first Americans to do so. Nor, in all likelihood, will they be the last. Why is that? Historian Robert Wiebe argued some years ago that one of the permanent issues in American culture is that each generation passes on to the next an unfinished and incomplete answer to who really is an American, who really belongs, who can be included. The struggle over who is an American and over what is American in culture and behavior relates to the constantly changing make-up of our society. Wiebe observes, “[T]ry as they might most Americans in [every generation have] stopped short of encompassing the nation... Each generation passed to the next an open question of who really belonged to American society” (90-91).

The nature of what should be explored is never a product of a broad consensus, but is instead always a highly contested matter. Rediscovery is a social construction metaphorically linked to the exploration of the New World and the geographical expansion of U.S. power and territory and the constant arrival of ever-newer groups

of immigrants. In my book *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project*,² I explore these issues in depth; suffice it to say here that efforts—such as those of the FWP—to rediscover an America that includes previously excluded groups always generate conflict. The national editors of the FWP wanted a more democratic, egalitarian, and inclusive society. While such a cultural program during the New Deal was an important component of the Roosevelt administration’s efforts for economic and social reform, as conservative critics at the time recognized, after World War II it often served a new uncritical conservative consensus.

Rediscovery has not only been about who should be included in American society, but also about what should be studied, understood, and *appreciated*, when the cultural creations of U. S. residents are examined. The FWP refused to draw firm lines between high and folk expressive culture. They wanted to celebrate both. National FWP folklore editor B. A. Botkin valued interviews with workers and former slaves as lore, literature, and history (Hirsch, *Portrait*). He saw such interviews as a contribution to cultural and artistic renewal. In some of the interviews, he saw art that combined lore and history in a new form of literature. Unlike many folklorists, he did not focus exclusively on the folklore of the past or see folklore as dying out, but lamented that most Americans did not “recognize or appreciate the folklore of the present” (Botkin, *Treasury* xxi-xxii).

Botkin was part of a long tradition of American intellectuals who argued for a broad view of the materials of an American culture, a tradition whose roots can be found in the work of such American Renaissance writers as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman and in the early twentieth century in W. E. B. Du Bois’s writings on *The Souls of Black Folks*, Randolph Bourne’s celebration of a “Trans-National America” whose diverse people come from around the globe, and Horace Kallen’s arguments for celebrating cultural pluralism (Hirsch, “Folklore”; Bourne 86-97; Kallen). It is a tradition that seems never to triumph and never to disappear. Writers, artists, scholars, and others can work to keep that tradition from disappearing, even if we cannot promise it will ever triumph. Like national FWP officials, we too need to contemplate the relationship between government and culture, and ultimately between culture and democracy. Then maybe we can create university-community projects that will contribute to understanding, experiencing, and living those relationships in new ways.

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My subjective experience studying the FWP is, dare I say it, part of a larger history of the Federal Writers in their times and ours, for as my life crossed paths with the products and records of this New Deal program so did larger historical trends. I did not go to graduate school in history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1971 with the idea that I would study the FWP, but that quickly changed once I arrived in what locals called “the southern part of heaven.” Eager to get ahead, I went to the UNC library before the semester started and asked to see what George Tindall had on his reserve list for his seminar on the history of the New South. Perhaps the first step on the path that led to my still ongoing research on the FWP began on an August day, when I discovered on Tindall’s list, *These Are Our Lives, As Told By The People and Written By Members of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia* (Federal

Writers' Project). I include the full title here because not only did I reread it several times that day, but also because everything in the title intrigued and puzzled me. I had no idea what a Federal Writer was, nor what the Federal Writers' Project was, nor that stories "as told by the people" could be history, especially if most of "the people" were southern tenant farmers, mill workers, and former slaves. Here I found a group of writers doing interviews that seemed to me to be both literature and history.

I began my graduate studies in a world in which the FWP was not famous and cherished for its many contributions to American culture. The fact that I, a callow twenty-three year old, had not yet heard of it by itself proves little. However, none of my graduate professors, nor my fellow graduate students, would have been shocked to learn that I had never heard of the Writers' Project, for neither had they for the most part. In 1971 one would have been hard pressed to find Americans at any educational level who had heard of the Writers' Project. Aside from a few specialists in various areas of American history who had come across works of the FWP in their studies, and the collectors of FWP state guidebooks, the project was neither praised nor criticized; it was simply forgotten or ignored. My first encounter with an FWP publication changed my life, influenced the research I have done in the years since, and started me thinking in new ways about why and how we study American culture and history. It also led me to think in new ways about who beyond academics could be the audience for such explorations.

My growing interest in the FWP was also affected by the fact that, both during the New Deal and in the America I had grown up in, efforts had been made to create a more inclusive national community. In 1971 I was part of an America in which questions of who was an American, and what could be called American, were issues that had been at the center of electoral politics and the politics of culture for more than a decade and a half. I saw myself as committed to the black freedom movement, the women's movement, the gay movement, and still later the disability rights movement. And these movements were certainly in large ways about whom we include when we use the term "American" and on what terms. In their later stages these movements were also about welcoming and appreciating *difference* as part of the meaning of democracy and equality. At the time, the work of the FWP seemed relevant to the world in which I lived and as it has turned out, continues to be relevant in a United States that still faces the need for a perpetual rediscovery of America in terms of both inclusion and difference. That is part of why I think an FWP-like project today and into the future still has so much to offer.

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My own research on the Federal Writers' Project grew out of my initial interest in *why* and *how* a book like *These Are Our Lives* had come to be. I wanted to understand why Federal Writers had conducted interviews with groups of Americans often left out of historical writing, and looked at their work as a contribution both to a new literature and history and to a cultural renewal. Given the movement among historians beginning in the early 1970s to look systematically at history from the bottom up and to develop oral and *public* history projects that sought audiences beyond academic walls, one might think the new social historians would be concerned with trying to understand what the FWP was about as well as what it had produced, but that was not the case. For the most part these historians

were so preoccupied with "mining" the material for data for a new social history that they largely ignored questions about how and why the documents they were using had come to be. The Project's intellectual and cultural history remained unwritten. It became clear that to address what had been previously ignored required understanding the FWP not only as part of the New Deal and the Great Depression, but also as part of the larger history of romantic nationalism and cultural pluralism. This larger canvas was necessary because the editors in the national office were addressing inherited questions as well as contemporaneous ones. As it turns out, we still find ourselves addressing these inherited questions—questions that seem to be a permanent part of American life.

So now here I am trying to encourage scholars today to undertake new FWP-like projects and to urge them to think about the relevance of FWP publications, such as the state guidebook series, with their broad view of who is an American, their inclusive definition of culture—their focus on the extraordinary in the ordinary and the ordinary in the extraordinary. We need to remember that they thought that to do this, they also needed to collect the life histories of former slaves, textile workers, tenant farmers, ethnic minorities, and industrial workers. We need to be asking who today, as Botkin put it in 1936, are our "submerged classes" (Botkin, *Regionalism* 185). He claimed, "[O]ur many folk cultures are not behind us at all but right under us. Below the surface of the dominant pattern are the popular life and fantasy of our cultural minorities and other nondominant groups--non-dominant but not recessive, not static but dynamic and transitional, on their way up" (Botkin, "The Folk" 126). We are thinking again in new ways about how to "introduce America to Americans" as the FWP tried to do, thinking about asking our fellow citizens as the FWP did, "Have you discovered America?" (Federal Writers' Project). Our thinking about what it would mean to ask such a question today, and about how to ask such a question, would benefit from revisiting the history of the Writers' Project.

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In 1935 Congressional majorities supported creating the FWP because they favored work relief, not because they supported federally sponsored arts projects. The directors of the FWP, however, seized the opportunity they were given to try to make a contribution to American culture. They worked to come up with projects that could speak to seemingly permanent questions in American life and culture. In effect, they wanted to reopen historical issues that seemed closed but that continued to affect American life. For example, the existing racial order in the South and the North in the New Deal era was linked to the fact that at the end of Reconstruction, blacks were denied the equal citizenship rights that were supposed to follow the end of slavery. By including the newer Americans, the new immigrants and their children, in all their work, the FWP also implicitly challenged the view of who was an American embedded in the immigration restriction laws enacted by Congress in the 1920s. Those laws had not simply lowered the number of immigrants who would be allowed into the country in the future, but specifically restricted immigration of people from southern and eastern Europe who were often thought of as racially inferior to U.S.-born descendants of Protestant northern Europeans.

The goal of these laws was to return the nation to what it was allegedly like before the "new immigration" that began in the 1880s had so dramatically altered

the ethnic and religious makeup of the United States. National FWP editors in sharp contrast wanted to acknowledge the tremendous growth and importance of a new post-Civil War industrial working class. The new immigrants and their children born in the United States and the African Americans who left the rural south for northern urban industrial centers were the major components of this new workforce. National FWP administrators rejected the narrow views of the 1920s about who was a real American. It was, however, clear that not everyone supported the FWP approach. Those who with anger and bitterness asked why the nation had changed from their nostalgic image of an older WASP America with blacks in their place—their threatened “real” America—greatly resented any attempt to try to reopen issues regarding race, ethnicity, and labor. Not surprisingly, these same forces criticized all New Deal programs.

Playing with the words “travel” and “tourism,” FWP editors tried to defend their agency by locating it in relationship to the goal of economic recovery. They also suggested to mainstream institutions, such as Chambers of Commerce, state universities, public libraries, local and state governments, and the daily newspapers, that FWP guides were an act of patriotism, affirming American culture (Hirsch, *Portrait* 46-47, 51). At the same time, they stressed travel as a form of discovery, a means for enlarging understanding. Travel was not seen as a privilege for the wealthy alone. The FWP invited Americans to use the road to explore American culture. The authors of the guidebooks created new forms of public space for sharing knowledge of American culture. Linked to tourism, it was primarily a space for middle-class travelers and readers, but it also asked them to look at groups who they had rarely been asked to view as fellow citizens. By 1938 many of the guidebooks had been completed. At that stage, national FWP editor Henry Alsberg wanted to examine more deeply American culture and that was one of the reasons he hired Botkin.

National FWP officials sought to reconcile romantic nationalism with cultural pluralism. Romantic nationalism in Europe, and at times in the United States, has often been exclusive, reactionary, illiberal, racist, and focused on homogeneity in its search for a core national tradition. Many European romantic nationalists stressed the traditions of a predominantly rural ethnic group over other groups within a nation’s borders in defining the essence of a national identity and culture. This approach created problems for the leadership of the FWP, who were both romantic nationalists and cultural pluralists. They sought to prove to skeptics that although the United States did not have a rural peasantry whose history stretched back to time immemorial, it still had rich cultural traditions. By the time they joined the Writers’ Project, most national FWP editors had absorbed anthropologist Franz Boas’s concept of cultural pluralism and relativism—cultures are diverse and different but one is not superior to another—and used it to answer their theoretical dilemmas. FWP officials argued American diversity meant that the United States had an abundance of diverse folk traditions and cultures on which to build an American national identity. In their view these traditions and cultures could not be ranked in the hierarchical and racist way earlier evolutionary anthropologists had done.

The national FWP office intertwined the practical goals of providing work relief with dreams of making enduring contributions to American culture. The work it undertook was also designed to employ the ninety percent of project employees who

came from the relief rolls and were not creative writers, but unemployed teachers, lawyers, librarians, and other educated middle class individuals. Therefore it is misleading to think of the FWP as a government patronage program for unemployed writers and to search obsessively for the names of writers who would later become famous, although you could find on its rolls such writers as Richard Wright, John Cheever, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston, who had been a student of Franz Boas. At its height, there were as many as 6,500 workers on the FWP. There was an FWP project in every state of the union. Governmental bodies from the national office down to the state and local level were involved in the project.

Local and state officials sometimes disagreed about what they wanted from the FWP and they both often opposed the national FWP office. Officials at the lower levels often opposed the kind of liberal pluralism that the national office embraced. And outside some major northern metropolitan areas, the Federal Writer working for a state project was very often much more conservative than the editors in the national office. For example, officials in almost every southern state opposed giving attention in their state guides to black residents that the national office demanded. Still, there is an overarching vision to the guides that reflects the outlook of the national office despite discordant notes regarding matters of race, ethnicity, and labor. The guides also often oscillate between treating diversity condescendingly as local color to amuse the middle class reader and treating the same material as a reflection of cultural vitality, of a democratic pluralism that needed to be embraced. If the FWP guidebooks did not entirely leave behind the search for the picturesque, they did not simply replicate it as they created work that had elements of both old and new traditions, what we might call a picturesque pluralism (Hirsch, *Portrait* 81-103).

Botkin’s concept of folklore was at the center of what might be called the second phase of the FWP. He wanted to examine and share American folklore in all its regional, ethnic, and work related dimensions with a wide audience. In contrast to conservative regionalists who imagined isolated, homogenous, and harmonious groups, which did not actually exist any longer—if they ever had—as the folk, Botkin called attention to the role of conflict in creating lore. For Botkin, conflict and acculturation produced hybrid lore, as not only various groups, but also levels of culture—high, popular, and folk—interacted. He wished to study hybrid lore and how it developed, rather than regard it as worthless evidence of a pure folklore that had been contaminated. As a Popular Front intellectual, Botkin made it clear that he found repulsive the connection between the search for folk purity, the hatred of the allegedly impure, and the growth of fascism. He did not see folklore as vanishing, something to be salvaged before it disappeared, but rather as something still being created, and not only in the rural areas, but also in the cities, not just in the fields, but also in the factories. Botkin maintained that, “for every form of folk fantasy that dies, a new one is being created, as culture in decay is balanced by folklore in the making” (Botkin, “The Folkness” 469). He formulated a left-liberal theoretical position reconciling romantic nationalism and cultural pluralism. “There is,” he maintained, “not one folk in [America] but many folk groups—as many as there are regional cultures or racial or occupational groups within a region.” He insisted it was time “to recognize that we have in America a variety of folk cultures, representing racial,

regional, and even industrial cultures; [and] that this very variety . . . constitutes the strength and richness in American lore” (Botkin, *The Folk* 3).

Morton Royse, national FWP social-ethnic studies editor, addressed the question of who and what is American in memorable terms. He maintained that the Polish, Irish, or Greek population of a town in, for example, traditionally white Anglo-Saxon Protestant New England “is American culture, not merely a contributor to American culture.” Put another way, he insisted, “their culture is contemporary American culture as truly as is the culture of Iowa-American farmers or Appalachian American hill-billies” (Royse 86-89). Royse and Botkin tried to coordinate folklore and oral history interviews in exploring the lives of ethnic minorities. They were convinced that “ways of living and ways of making a living” were deeply intertwined (Botkin, 5). Most of the material gathered under their direction has never been published, although much of it is now available online through the Library of Congress’ American Folklife Center.

Henry Alsberg captured the grand liberal, and pluralistic vision of the story that he and his colleagues in the Washington office wanted to tell: “The building up of our country knows no parallel in historical time . . . How a social and cultural unity was achieved . . . without stamping cultural differences into one mold, producing the unique American civilization and how the fabric was enlarged is the crux of our story” (Hirsch, *Portrait* 136). In trying to tell this story, Botkin also worked closely with FWP Negro affairs editor Sterling Brown. Both thought interviews with former slaves should focus not only on life in slavery but also on the denial of full citizenship rights since Reconstruction, which stood in the way of the former slaves and blacks born in “freedom” becoming equal citizens. Brown shared Botkin’s and Royse’s rejection of the “contributions” approach to studying minorities. In the uncompleted “Portrait of the Negro as American,” Brown, like Botkin and Royse, stressed what they all referred to as a *participation* over a *contributions* approach. They argued that a contributions approach only focused on a few minority group members who had succeeded according to the standards of the dominant group, while ignoring the many who created a culture worthy of respect despite being excluded. Equally important, the minority, though kept separate from the majority, still participated in shaping American history, life, and culture as a whole (Hirsch, *Portrait* 112-131; 138-39).

At the same time, the FWP began these projects, the distinguished Columbia University historian Alan Nevins pleaded in 1938 in *The Gateway to History* “for an organization which [would make] a systematic attempt to obtain from the lips and papers of Americans who had lived significant lives a fuller record of their accomplishments” (iv). What Nevins had in mind differed significantly from what FWP officials wanted to do. Nevins saw history as a form of literature that actively helped constitute a nation and gave it an identity, but his focus was on the role of prominent men. What he feared was that the records that would make it possible to narrate a history focused on the movers and shakers were disappearing as the telephone and modern travel led to the disappearance of written documents. For him oral history was important because it could create the kind of documents that were missing in the modern age, thereby making it possible for historians to still write about leaders. Like Nevins, national FWP officials argued for the key role of history

and literature in constituting national identity, but they were more interested in the new social classes modernity created than in how the traditional records usually left by elites were disappearing because of new technology (Hirsch, “Before Columbia” 1-3, 6-10).

Botkin theorized the FWP’s blurring the lines among history, literature, and lore. He maintained writers could become ethnographers among the urban working classes American anthropologists and folklorists ignored. He thought they could document “the popular life and fantasy of our cultural minorities and other nondominant groups” to gain the knowledge and insight often missing from much of the thirties’ proletarian literature and write about groups that high modernists ignored. Botkin was encouraging writers to create new literary forms (Botkin, “The Folk and the Individual” 128-129.) He also raised important questions—about the narrative nature of history, about who gets to speak, and about the relationship between historical writing and contested memories—that scholars have only recently begun to focus on. This becomes clear in *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, a volume one might almost say choreographed excerpts that Botkin edited from the FWP slave narratives (see Hirsch, *Lay*). Botkin insisted “that this book has many authors, who are also its heroes. Together they make one author and one hero—the ex-slave” (Botkin, *Papers*, Box 114). In his drafts for the preface to *Lay My Burden Down*, Botkin provided insights into thinking about the FWP’s vision of cultural studies and about how a reader might approach the text:

Just as it is impossible to read these stories as mere stories, so it was thought that by putting emphasis on story-telling the book would reach a larger audience. Certainly the impact of a document is no less for its being literature and narrative as well as history and statement. It is at once an old and a new kind of literature and history that we have here—something like what we had in the days before writing and something that we may have more of in the future, as it becomes more generally understood that people can talk a kind of literature and that memory is a form of history. (Botkin, *Papers* Box 14)

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In recent years I have been trying to understand why the work of the FWP was ignored for so long. That the FWP operated outside the circle of university-based, traditional disciplines, that it worked in genres not associated with traditional scholarly formats, and that it deliberately blurred genre distinctions among history, literature, and folklore worked against its legacy making a difference in an expanding disciplinary-driven university system that thrived between 1945 and 1965. Organizers today looking to the FWP for inspiration should also probably expect to have to struggle to gain respect for such work, but that may be less true today than it was in the two and half decades following the demise of the FWP. Perhaps today the situation is different because trends in post-structural theory and cultural studies have called into question the boundaries university departments in post-WWII America worked so hard to create. But beware if you think that engaging in and gaining respect for FWP-like endeavors today is going to be an easy task. The story

of the FWP's reputation and legacy is something of a cautionary tale. Even most postmodernist academics write for other scholars whose judgments affect their careers, not for a public audience.

The political landscape of our time is as fraught as it was for the leaders of the FWP. It is possible to understand how the morale of national FWP officials could be bolstered by the feeling that a New Deal-Popular Front bloc would inevitably triumph in public policy and in the politics of culture, but in retrospect that seems a naïve hope. It was, however, a hope that kept them going as they saw the project suffer increasing congressional cuts and the attacks of the Martin Dies-led House Un-American Activities Committee. In addition, some of the national FWP leaders saw themselves as part of an effort at professionalizing a scholarship that would address itself to a public audience—hence their eagerness to explore the possibilities of the FWP working closely with the Library of Congress and the American Council of Learned Societies—and presenting aspects of their research at scholarly conferences and in scholarly journals. As the FWP gradually wound down with the rise of a conservative, anti-New Deal coalition in Congress and with the looming threat of war, Botkin tried to create a permanent FWP-like organization operating through the Music Division of the Library of Congress (Hirsch, *Portrait* 231-236).

Given the path-breaking work the FWP had done, one might assume its work was honored and admired in the post World War II period for its vision and accomplishments; one might assume the project was remembered and honored, but one would be seriously mistaken. We may perhaps too easily forget how uncomfortable and chilling a place post-WWII America quickly became for anything associated with the New Deal and Popular Front cultural politics. The publication of Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* in 1945 provided an occasion for what turned out to be the last flurry of public discussion of the Writers' Project for more than two decades. Despite the positive reviews, there was an undertow of criticism that indicated that in roughly seven short years, the world Botkin had worked in when he joined the FWP in 1938 had changed dramatically. Many reviewers appreciated *Lay My Burden Down (LMBD)* as both history and literature. One critic insisted, "[T]he Federal Writers' Project produced a major contribution to the social history and literary heritage of America" (Christman 21). Former Federal Writer Jack Conroy claimed that "the achievements of the FWP were ... being forgotten (Conroy, news clipping in Botkin, *Papers*, Box 14). Despite what he saw as noteworthy accomplishments, he thought that the contributions he and his fellow writers on the project had made to American culture were "too often unsung" (Conroy). Those critics who lauded "the fine legacies of the short-lived Federal Writers' Project" (Christman 21) were by the end of World War II writing with the knowledge that they were defending a "much-maligned" (Brown 574) and, as they correctly feared, a soon to be ignored episode in American history (Christman 21). Thus, one reviewer referred to *LMBD* as "Another excellent fruit of the too-little-appreciated W. P. A. cultural projects" (Reynolds 736).

In 1945, praise for the FWP's work, usually addressed to the intellectual readers of liberal-left journals, often encapsulated a defense of a New Deal legacy that its supporters knew was under attack. Lloyd Lewis captured the mood when he wrote about *LMBD* that "the book is only another one of the things that keep popping up

to remind us what all those people accomplished while leaning on shovels during the days of WPA." Thus, the publication of previously unpublished FWP work had provided an occasion for a limited but vigorous attempt at trying to appreciate the project. It is revealing that those who valued the work of the FWP assumed that the public needed to be reminded that a project that had ended only several years earlier had significant accomplishments. The defenders of the FWP and the other arts projects indirectly provided evidence of the diminished status of these programs and the varied nature of the developing hostility toward them and much of the New Deal legacy.

The ambivalence toward the New Deal, the ordeal of living through the Great Depression, and the anti-communist rhetoric of the Cold War tarred New Deal and left domestic politics indiscriminately with the broad-brushed accusation of anti-American disloyalty. Consider what might happen if a new FWP type project published interviews with American citizens of Arab or Pakistani ancestry as an effort to "introduce America to Americans" or collected life histories of resident aliens and residents who are here illegally. And who knows when, if ever, there will be an end to the current war on terror, and whether we will ever enter a post-war-on-terror world. In many ways, it is not an auspicious time for raising the question of who and what we refer to when we talk about being an American. In reality it never is, which is all the more reason why it needs to be done.

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The inability to appreciate the legacy of the FWP was just as widespread in the academic world as it was among the general public. Neither history departments nor those interested in oral history in particular manifested any significant interest in the FWP before the late 1960s. In this period, historians were more interested in consensus than conflict in American history. While they showed an increasing interest in exploring the concepts of other social sciences, it was within the framework of maintaining a strong disciplinary identity. Oral history projects tended to be located in libraries and archives, which meant the interviews were treated as historical sources, but not as versions of history presented by an interviewee. University history departments showed little or no interest in these endeavors. The vast majority of oral history interviews in this period were with prominent individuals. Most of these oral historians were interested in discussing memory only with the goal of learning how to judge the accuracy of the memory of an individual being interviewed. At the same time, there was practically no interest in how individuals and groups narrated their stories, in how they constructed their memory of the past, nor in the way memory and what was worth remembering were contested. The very things that had led national FWP officials to do interviews were of little concern to oral historians in the post-war 1950s. By the late sixties, more and more oral historians came to share the FWP's concerns. Today, virtually all oral historians are interested in these questions.

At Indiana University in the late 1950s, Richard Dorson created the first doctoral program in folklore. The standard narrative regarding Dorson's role in the history of American folklore studies treats him as a scholar determined to replace amateurism with rigorous scholarship and to carve a solid niche in the academy for folklore as a distinct field with its own disciplinary identity. An emphasis on

method trumped theory. This approach led Dorson to dismiss the work of the FWP as amateurish. In addition Dorson, a Cold War liberal, rejected the FWP's Popular Front cultural politics. Furthermore, Dorson saw an emphasis on a public audience as not only a potential lowering of standards, but as a threat to gaining the respect for folklore studies he wanted scholars in other disciplines to show. Thus he both ignored the work of the FWP and opposed the work of folklorists in the 1960s who wanted to create public folklore programs. Although Dorson worked with scholars in other disciplines and considered himself both a historian and a folklorist, it was of the utmost importance to him to create and police boundaries between folklore and academe. Some scholars have argued this led to a lack of innovative theory among folklorists in the 1950s and isolated folklore from other disciplines (Briggs 91-105). A renewed interest among folklorists in the relationship of folklore studies to other disciplines and to a public audience eventually led to a renewed interest in the FWP.

American Studies emerged as a discipline during the height of the Cold War. It owed much of its success not only to some of its early brilliant scholars but also to its search for an American exceptionalism that manifested itself in a national character and culture worthy of international respect. In a sense, American Studies was, as were the humanities and social sciences in general in this period, a form of anti-Marxism (Denning 356-380). National attributes figured largely in these studies, but class hardly at all, and social history, race, and ethnicity not much more. There was no place in this world of American cultural studies for the FWP, which had been interested in aspects of the American experience that the new American Studies usually ignored.

In some ways, this quick tour of these disciplines during the height of the Cold War is unfair to their actual achievements, and ignores pockets of resistance, such as the famous neo-progressive historians at the University of Wisconsin. My point is not to write these disciplines' histories but to explain an academic world that had little interest in the FWP. And we should not kid ourselves about how happy everybody will be if and when a new FWP-like project seems to challenge traditional scholarly habits, administrators see the first signs of controversy involving their institutions, or parts of a community react negatively to how they are portrayed.

...

The FWP story can, I think, be relevant, and even, dare I say, inspirational. As a model, however, it has limitations that we have to acknowledge. Thinking about the limitations of the FWP is also a way in which the New Deal agency can be helpful to us. Like the FWP, we are looking for a practical way to undertake new ways of telling the American story, of identifying, creating, and connecting American places and the variety of Americans who inhabit them. Their vehicle was the Depression's unemployment crisis. Ours is the desire of institutions of higher education to serve the public and the fact that the vast majority of college students take composition classes, along with the initial impetus of the Great Recession and its parallels to the 1930s. We have a sense of some of the opportunities the Depression created for New Deal cultural projects that might help us respond creatively to the economic realities of our time at the local, national, and global levels. Recognizing some of the limitations of the Depression as a vehicle for cultural studies may help us anticipate problems in the student-community model for a new FWP-like venture. Some of

these issues concern tourism and travel, place making, organizational authority, and ways of reaching and creating audiences. The FWP had to employ many people in the local projects who made little positive contribution to the work of the organization. Beyond that there was also the problem of the various ways in which the composition of the local FWP workforce was not representative of the community in terms of class, ethnicity, race, and gender. The situation in the South was notorious from the national FWP officials' point of view because few blacks were on the project and where they were, segregation laws dictated how they were organized and employed (Hirsch, *Portrait* 7, 28-29). In general, FWP employees were not a cross-section of the community. Nor did the FWP self-consciously consider the history of gender roles. Regarding class, ethnicity, and gender, the variety of students in composition and rhetoric classes will provide their own special problems *and* opportunities in creating FWP-like projects.

In a time of economic depression, the FWP had little choice but to play on the economic benefits of tourism for local communities and states and at the same time try to transform tourism into a form of travel, exploration, and growth. Perhaps we can avoid the literal tourist appeal the FWP sought to tap into, but can we avoid the modality of tourism? After all, one of the central concerns of cultural anthropologists for the last twenty-five years has been the close relationship between tourist/travel modalities and ethnography, and the way that mode exoticizes subjects who are not given an opportunity to speak for themselves (Clifford). There is no simple answer, but awareness as well as experience can help us develop a self-reflexive critique.

The FWP did not have a community-based discussion about how to engage in place making. Or, put another way, the elements of the community that affected this discussion the most were social and cultural elites. What is to be the relationship between students and community in our time in constructing a sense of place? How do we try to make discussions about such issues representative of varying opinions? How do we avoid a narrative that reflects only the view of one individual or one group? The national FWP office often tried to exert authority to make state and local units conform to their vision of place making, sometimes with more success and sometimes with less.

Is that, however, the way we want to handle the issues of authority today? Should editorial power rest with the students, the community, the professors, or the university administrators? And, with which members of these groups should authority rest? It no longer seems possible, defensible, or desirable to make, for example, the professors the final authority, as the national FWP office *tried* to make itself the final authority. But while it is necessary to give some say to all groups involved, it is not necessary for experts, in this case the professors, to abdicate all authority, for denying experts any role is to deny the value of expertise. As historian Michael Frisch has written, the question is how to have a shared authority, which is no easy matter (xxi-xxii). Nevertheless, unless the idea of sharing authority is entertained from the beginning, it has no chance. In addition, without shared authority, only one group argues about and develops answers to questions about what needs to be said about the places to be included in the work of this new FWP. Students, professors, and community members will all have things to teach and learn

from each other. While that is a fine sentiment, it is easier said than done. To be achieved, it has to be worked at consciously.

The communications revolution of our time would need to be fully exploited by a new FWP-like project. Books were at the center of the FWP's effort to disseminate its work, in particular, encyclopedic state guides, local guides, and some collections of interviews. That is not to say that they did not experiment with other forms of communication. There were FWP scripts presented on the radio. There were collaborations between the Federal Theatre Project and the FWP. The Federal Art Project provided materials for FWP book exhibits. Photographs taken by Farm Security Administration photographers appear in FWP publications. The Internet, computers, smart phones, and tablets open up a wealth of possibilities. Indeed, government agencies such as the American Folk Life Center at the Library of Congress have led the way in digitizing unpublished FWP materials, making them available via the Internet. Spark Media, a private documentary film company, has released a film history of the Writers' Project, "Soul of a People," has broadcast radio programs on the subject, and is developing an interactive learning game about it. The possibilities for sharing material seem limited only by our imaginations.

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Perhaps given that these academic disciplines are to a degree welcoming class and social history back into the discussion, paying attention to the "linguistic turn," and so seeking a public as well as a teaching and scholarly face, all will be clear sailing for a new FWP-like program. I doubt it will be so easy. Nevertheless, the game is worth the candle. It is also necessary to invite public historians, oral historians, and public folklorists into the discussion with rhetoric, communication, and composition professors, as we think about a new FWP-like project. These groups all have extensive experience with both the problems and the opportunities in the presentation of history and lore to a general audience. We need to be aware of the differences between orality and writing, between the performance of lore and the presentation of it in other mediums—and the disciplines mentioned have much to teach us.

We also should not ignore the possibilities for creative writing in a new, FWP-like project. The FWP didn't. Botkin was especially interested in these connections, as the unpublished work of the Living Lore units he created in Chicago and New York City show (Botkin, "Living Lore" 252-263; Botkin, *We Called It* 189-201). In effect, he sought to create new types of work that blurred the lines between history, folklore, and creative writing while challenging traditional assumptions of existing discipline-driven work in these areas. A new FWP-like project could end up challenging the fundamental assumptions of disciplines today and contribute to new theoretical understandings while at the same time reaching a diverse public audience. When Botkin spoke to members of the MLA at their 1938 meeting, he declared that the challenge facing a democratic scholarship and art was to study and use folklore to understand and strengthen democracy: "Upon us devolves the tremendous responsibility of studying folklore as a living culture and of understanding its meaning and function not only in its immediate setting but in progressive and democratic society as a whole." If we take up the challenge of creating a new, FWP-like effort of rediscovering America, the responsibility Botkin talked about in 1938 devolves upon us (Botkin, "WPA" 14). Hopefully, it will not take as long for

Americans to appreciate a new project in the FWP tradition as it is taking them to appreciate the old FWP.

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The need for a perpetual rediscovery of America is seemingly permanent, a challenge for every generation. But now is an especially important time for taking up the challenge. The similarities and differences between now and the 1930s are striking. Take, for example, the issue of "newer Americans." Reading the newspapers and watching television, one would think today that the only immigrants in the nation are illegal Mexicans. And yet anyone who visits a major U. S. city knows that this is not the case. Perhaps the majority today knows less about the culture and experiences of Nigerian, Afghani, Korean, Lebanese, and Jordanian immigrants than the majority in the 1930s knew about Italian, Polish, and Jewish immigrants.

So much need, so much opportunity. We should look forward to accepting the challenge and seeing what we can do. Let us make the FWP a living legacy.

Endnotes

1. "Folklore is a body of traditional belief, custom and expression handed down largely by word of mouth and circulating chiefly outside of commercial and academic means of communication and instruction. Every group bound together by common interests and purposes, whether educated or uneducated, rural or urban, possesses a body of traditions which may be called its folklore. Into these traditions enter many elements, individual, popular, and even 'literary,' but all are absorbed and assimilated through repetition and variation into a pattern which has value and continuity for the group as a whole" (Botkin, "Manual").

2. For further information and analysis, see my book, *Portrait of America*, which I draw on throughout this essay.

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