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Write. Persist. Struggle: Sponsors of Writing and Workers' Education in the 1930s

Deborah Mutnick

Organizations like the John Reed Clubs and the WPA Federal Writers' Project, as well as publications like *The New Masses* can be seen as "literacy sponsors" of the U.S. literary left in the 1930s, particularly the young, the working class, and African American writers. The vibrant, inclusionary, activist, literary culture of that era reflected a surge of revolutionary ideas and activity that seized the imagination of a generation of writers and artists, including rhetoricians like Kenneth Burke. Here I argue that this history has relevance for contemporary community writing projects, which collectively lack the political cohesiveness and power of the national and international movements that sponsored the 1930s literary left but may anticipate another global period of struggle for democracy in which writers and artists can play a significant role.

Once more we appeal to our readers: Do not be passive. Write. Your life in mine, mill and farm is of deathless significance to the history of the world. Tell us about it in the same language you use in writing a letter. It may be literature—it often is. Write. Persist. Struggle.
(Gold 3)

The editors of this special issue of the *Community Literacy Journal* call on the emergent subfield of community writing to build sustainable "engaged infrastructures" (see also, e.g., Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters; Mathieu, Parks, and Rousculp). Most of us in the academy who gravitate toward community-based writing, literacy, and social justice projects rely on support from our institutions and our own personal or institutional contacts with community organizations to build such infrastructures. Some of these structures have been robust but many are tenuous and transient, and in this period of the corporate, defunded university, institutional support may be harder than ever to obtain. In what follows, I give a short history of the 1930s literary left as a historical analogue for us to study, making clear how its context was different from ours, assessing its failures and achievements, and suggesting how this history might serve to sharpen the focus of community writing and inspire an alternative network of alliances.

The 1930s¹ was a fertile period of American literature that engaged writers in political struggle as well as military combat in the Spanish Civil War and World

War II;² fostered vigorous public debates over literary theory and criticism; saw the publication of close to one hundred proletarian novels; and gave rise to the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), one of four programs that created jobs for artists, actors, musicians, and writers as part of the New Deal. This groundswell of literary activity was enabled directly and indirectly by the radical left—in particular, the Communist Party of America (CPUSA) and its publications, organizations, and schools—which had coalesced in response to the Russian Revolution and the tumultuous world events that followed, finding common cause in the fight against fascism.³ At its height in 1938, some 75,000 Americans had joined the CPUSA. Established and emergent writers wrote for the *New Masses*, *Partisan Review*, and *Left Front*, among other leftwing magazines. They joined John Reed Clubs and the League of American Writers; attended the American Writers' Congress meetings; and found employment as Federal Writers. However, anticommunist ideology has erased or distorted much of the history of these writers, leading, as Alan Wald observes, to “a speedy judgment in 1950s academe as to the fleeting quality of their attainments and the careful reconstruction of the Great Depression as an aberrant time of misguided hopes” (324). Only recently contested by scholars like Wald, the prevailing judgment of literary and cultural critics of this period is still that politics degraded poetry and diminished literary quality, reducing literature to propaganda.

The writing produced and advocated by the 1930s literary left, which cultivated young, working class writers and created a readership for and about them, might be seen as a form of literacy sponsorship. For Deborah Brandt, sponsors are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). Complicating the history of sponsorship of these 1930s writers and contemporary assessments of them is the shifting terrain of radical politics in the 1930s and the deeply embedded anticommunist backlash against it. As Barbara Foley argues, any attempt to reassess this period's revolutionary outlook and the proletarian literature it produced must also “disentangle this ideological skein” (7). My interest here in pursuing this work of disentanglement is to recover the experience of the literary left to help us think more expansively about the sponsorship of contemporary forms of community writing.

Since the 1960s, inspired by the social and cultural movements of that decade, there has been a steady increase of interest in community writing projects that amplify the voices and publish the stories of underrepresented or socially oppressed people. For example, the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers in England, established in 1976, was part of a campaign of working class dissent in support of working class writing “as a cultural activity developed alongside political action” (Federation). In 1998, Joe Lambert, Dana Atchley, and Nina Mullen founded the Center for Digital Storytelling, now known as StoryCenter, in Berkeley, California, out of a desire to make storytelling and creative expression more accessible through “a shared vision of cultural democracy and social change” (“Our Story”). Since 2003, consciously echoing the FWP, David Isay's StoryCorps has been

recording personal stories—conversations between loved ones—that are archived in the Library of Congress. Along with these higher-profile ventures, smaller local efforts like the Neighborhood Story Project, founded in 2004 in New Orleans by Abram Shalom and Rachel Breunlin, support writing from the bottom up, publishing community authors and tapping the creative potential of everyday life.

In higher education, the use of writing as a tool for service learning, community engagement, community-based research, and community literacy has become increasingly widespread, often aimed at expanding the definition of who writes and whose voices are heard (see, e.g., Flower; Long). Representing a range of mostly left or liberal ideologies, community-writing scholars generally express a deep commitment to participatory democracy and link literacy to social justice. Also indicative of and contributive to the rise of community writing as a subfield is the establishment of journals like *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning* in 2000 and *Community Literacy Journal* in 2006. Accompanying these activities have been meetings on community writing, including Writing Democracy, which held its first conference in 2011 and has since met annually at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and several smaller gatherings of key scholars.⁴ At the first annual Conference on Community Writing in Boulder in 2015, attended by more than 350 scholars, graduate students, and community representatives, some veteran compositionists predicted its impact on composition and rhetoric might rival that of the 1966 Dartmouth Conference, which is widely viewed as a turning point in the growth of the field.

Most community writing projects today are local and autonomous, defined variously as service learning, civic engagement, community research, community literacy, or community publishing. Many are affiliated with higher education; some embrace the digital humanities. Most concur with Paula Mathieu's theory of community writing in relation to a "public turn" in which the writing done in university-community partnerships is "not based on charity but on tactical projects that create social opportunities" (xviii). Similarly, Bruce Herzberg's influential 1994 essay on community service emphasizes the need for critical analysis of students' belief in individualism and meritocracy in order that they understand "structural inequities" (312) and "systemic discrimination" (314). Citing Kurt Spellmeyer, Herzberg envisions schools as "radically democratic institutions" that cultivate "an awareness of the 'human world' in students as a "common historical project" from which they learn "not only to question and analyze the world" but also "to imagine transforming it" (317). Many similar initiatives share this commitment to social justice but few express just what radical democracy entails or what sort of historical project is meant or social transformation is needed.

To be explicit, the contradiction I begin here to unravel is between the social justice agendas of most community writing projects and our failure writ large to remedy deepening global injustice. Thus, while we may agree that "social structures" produce injustice, the analysis of those structures falls short of explaining

the relations of production that created them; even with proper analysis, we are collectively unsure as to how to transform them. Anticomunist ideology combined with the collapse of nearly all actually existing socialist states and a greatly weakened global left have distorted and lessened if not erased historical memory, instilling fear and disapproval of vertical leadership and socialist alternatives to capitalism and tacit agreement to keep classrooms, nonprofits, and funded projects politically neutral. At the same time, we see how the systematic destabilization of the left in the twentieth century continues to deracinate militant uprisings from the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter. Many of the same questions of political direction that beset these movements apply to community writing's social justice commitments; lacking sponsorship of the sort that enabled the 1930s literary left, we struggle to define what democracy means or how real justice might truly be won.

It seems therefore useful to look back at this more radical period of "sponsored" literary formations from 1926 to 1948, focusing on the *New Masses*, the John Reed Clubs, the League of American Writers, the American Writers' Congresses, and the Federal Writers' Project, in order to recover its lost history for the sub-field of community writing. Founded in 1926, the *New Masses* followed in the tradition of *The Masses* (1911-1917) and its successor, *The Liberator* (1918-1924). When *The Liberator*, under the auspices of the Communist Party, became *The Workers' Monthly*, the *New Masses* filled a void in left cultural publications. From 1926 to 1928, a period during which the *New Masses* was "searching for its own voice" (Peck 389), the magazine published an array of well-known writers, including D.H. Lawrence, Mark Van Doren, William Carlos Williams, and even Ezra Pound. In June 1928, Mike Gold, best known for his proletarian novel *Jews without Money*, assumed the editorship of *New Masses*, turning it into "A Magazine of Workers' Art and Literature," which began to define Marxist literary criticism in the U.S. as it debated "the possibilities of a proletarian literature in America" (Peck 389).

By the late 1920s, Gold's passionate support for proletarian writing had provoked heated literary debates in mainstream venues, pushing liberal, middle class writers to the left as they confronted theoretical issues of class and difference in relation to the production of literature. It was a time when the Russian Revolution had awakened people's hopes and dreams worldwide for a more just social order as economies worsened, war loomed, and the collapse of capitalism seemed imminent. According to David Peck, "...the sudden emergence of an American proletarian literature in both creative and critical forms was largely the achievement of the editorial policies of the *New Masses*, particularly in the period before 1930, when workers were urged to write of their lives and writers were urged to turn to the lives of workers for their subjects and their themes" (390). Despite its cultural impact, the *New Masses* was forced in 1929 to abandon its focus on proletarian literature in order to remain financially viable by publishing better-known authors. To continue to support young, working class writers, the editorial staff established the first John Reed Club (JRC) in New York City, appealing to "writers who were socially conscious, but not necessarily those who were communists" (Homburger 233).⁵

As Eric Homberger explains in his account of the relationship between proletarian literature and the JRCs, the *New Masses* was a “Proletcult” magazine between 1926 and 1928. The Proletcult, which stood for “proletarian cultural-educational organizations,” was established in 1917 on the eve of the Russian Revolution. Gold described the Proletcult as “Russia’s organized attempt to remove the economic barriers and social degradation that repressed that proletarian instinct during the centuries” (69). Its legacy is complicated by its relationship to rapidly changing conditions in the Soviet Union. By 1920, tensions arose over the Proletcult’s demand for autonomy as Lenin sought to unify and secure the new country. There was also deep opposition to the Proletcult’s focus on proletarian art, which in its extreme form repudiated the “bourgeois” art of the past, a position both Lenin and Trotsky renounced. Nevertheless, leftwing American writers seized the idea of proletarian culture for its endorsement of worker education and its resonance with the radical democracy expressed by native poets like Walt Whitman. According to Homberger, “The John Reed Clubs were an attempt to apply the Proletcult notion of literary studios to America” (226), promoting mass literacy and education despite theoretical arguments that the creation of a proletarian culture in 1920s America was a case of what Marxist critic V.F. Calverton called “Proletarianitis” (228).

Gold and other writers affiliated with the *New Masses* and the John Reed Clubs remained committed to “the Proletcult ideal of tapping the genuine reservoir of literary hunger among elements of the American working class,” and the *New Masses* published, among other writers, a New Jersey silk weaver, a Minnesota lumberman, and a New York taxi driver (Homberger 232). By 1934, over thirty JRCs had sprung up nationwide with over 1,200 members (Homberger 233). One of those young writers was Richard Wright, who was recruited into the Chicago JRC in the summer of 1933. Wright’s experience in the JRC and the Communist Party, which he joined later that year, formed “a bridge” for him between the isolation of growing up black and poor in the Jim Crow South and “the American intellectual world” (Fabre 103). When the CPUSA decided to dissolve the clubs in 1934, replacing them with the League of American Writers, Wright protested: “I asked what was to become of the young writers whom the Communist Party had implored to join the clubs and who were ineligible for the new group...” (Fabre 136-37). But Wright, who by then had attained some recognition as a poet and was asked to join other black signatories in support of the first American Writers’ Congress, need not have worried about losing his place amid the nation’s leading writers and intellectuals.

At the 1935 Congress, held in New York City, Wright met Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and Meridel Le Sueur, among others. Also at the Congress was Kenneth Burke, a “kind of ‘eccentric’ New Critic” who nevertheless played an active role in the literary left, according to Anne George and Jack Selzer (1). Franklin Folsom, who served as the League’s executive secretary from 1935 to 1942, notes its “close contact” with the National Council of Teachers of English and sponsorship of a weekly lecture series “Find Yourself in Writing” (78), indicative of broad participation in the Congresses. Also showing their mass character is the degree to which the

NCTE participated in the fourth Congress as reported in the November 1941 issue of *College English*, starting off with an account of Columbia University professor, writer, and fellow traveler Dorothy Brewster's address on "The Interpretation of Social Change in Literature." Probably written by longtime *College English* editor W. Wilbur Hatfield, this unsigned "News and Notes" column comments that Russian authors "from Gogol to Chekhov steadily undermined the confidence of the ruling class and exposed to this class the dry rot of its culture," while "English writers, from Dickens and Gaskell on, pleaded less effectively and with a stronger ruling class for compassion and generosity to the workers. They seized the facts but failed to give them a sufficiently rugged framework of interpretation" (201).

Continuing in the tradition of the John Reed Clubs, the League of American Writers established writers' schools, including one in New York City in the fall of 1937 that offered, among other classes, an introduction to labor journalism to trade unionists. One of its students was James Baldwin, "a slender black teenager" who had to walk a hundred blocks to school and a hundred blocks back home because he had no subway fare (Folsom 77). An earlier writers' school, organized in 1934 by the New York City JRC, offered courses in Marxism and literature, poetry and fiction, as well as one in English prose taught by Burke, who also participated in a panel on "Bourgeois and Proletarian Types in World Literature" as part of a weekly lecture and discussion series. Additionally, the League sponsored summer writers' conferences in 1940 at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee and in New Hampshire in 1941; a major school was also established in Hollywood, staffed by writers including Cedric Belfrage, Meyer Levin, and Dalton Trumbo.⁶

Homberger maintains that the dissolution of the JRCs in 1935 as the party sought to broaden the popular front constituted "a substantial move to the right" (244). Contesting this view of American writers as obedient to Soviet directives, Barbara Foley asserts that "many particularities of the American literary left's formulation of its goals ... indicate anything but a slavish desire on the Americans' part to 'follo[w] as closely as possible the Soviet line'" (72).⁷ Rather than attack class-conscious writing, Foley argues, debates at the 1935 Congress revealed a deepening appreciation for dialectical materialism. Among other examples, she cites the "sharp confrontation" with Kenneth Burke over his proposal to substitute the word "people" for "worker" (124; see also, George and Selzer 16-29). Burke's populist perspective anticipates an increasingly moderate disciplinary mainstream that defines most contemporary university-community projects. This trend was already evident by the second Congress in 1937 at which, Foley notes, "[V]irtually no worker-writers were in attendance and little was said about reaching a working-class readership or even portraying working-class life. The [Joseph] Freeman who had charged Burke with social fascism in 1935 now proclaimed that the first task facing the writers in attendance was 'to fight for a great American culture'" (127).

Two more Congresses followed, one in 1939 just prior to the Stalin-Hitler pact, and the other in 1941, a few weeks before the German invasion of the Soviet Union. The 1939 Congress brought 450 delegates, including 38 representatives of

other countries, to New York City. The opening night of the Congress at Carnegie Hall was packed, with nearly 3,000 people in attendance. Among notable writers at the Congress were Dorothy Parker, Dashiell Hammett, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Lillian Hellman, Thomas Mann, and Heywood Broun. Folsom notes that others unable to attend sent “support and regret,” including Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and Archibald MacLeish. Dorothy Parker voiced a widely felt sentiment about the writers of the period: “They know you cannot find yourself until you find your fellow men—they know there is no longer ‘I’; there is ‘We’” (qtd. in Folsom 84). According to Folsom, ten million people listened over a nationwide radio channel—the new technology of the day—to a session about writing for the radio that emphasized that “good literature can be produced on the air; good, pro-democratic, anti-fascist literature” (86).

At the Fourth American Writers’ Congress in June 1941, Richard Wright gave the opening address, “Not My People’s War,” to 3,000 people, arguing that the fast spreading conflict abroad was an imperialist, capitalist war and that black people, in particular, who would still be expected to fight the Nazis in segregated troops, should join anti-war, anti-fascist calls for peace. Coining the “double victory” slogan of the civil rights movement against fascism abroad and racism at home, Wright blasted President Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” as a “metaphysical obscenity,” contending that the U.S. needed to solve its own domestic problems and that people of color “shall fight as determinedly against those who deny freedom at home as we shall fight against those who deny it to others abroad” (9). At the end of the Congress, Dashiell Hammett was elected president of the League of American Writers, succeeding Donald Ogden Stewart, who became a vice president along with Wright, Meridel Le Sueur, John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, George Seldes, and Erskine Caldwell. Theodore Dreiser was elected honorary president. A little more than two weeks later, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the U.S. declared war. Most if not all that had made possible the literary, creative, educational, and political genius of this generation of writers would soon melt into air, to paraphrase Marx and Engels, as capitalism reasserted itself more powerfully than ever in the second world war.

Another casualty first of anticommunist attacks led by Congressman Martin Dies Jr. and then of the war effort was the Federal Writers’ Project, which I have written about elsewhere (Mutnick). From the time of its inception in 1935, the FWP drew heavily on writers associated with *New Masses*, the John Reed Clubs, the League of American Writers, and the American Writers’ Congresses. The FWP’s commitment to egalitarian, democratic ideals was influenced not only by liberal arguments for cultural pluralism but also by the literary left’s engagement with proletarian literature and its critique of capitalism. Among the FWP’s accomplishments were travel guides modeled after Baedekers, produced in 48 states and still being republished, over 2,000 interviews with the last generation of former slaves, the American Life Histories, and the anthology *American Stuff: An Anthology of Prose and Verse by Members of the Federal Writers’ Project* as well as unpublished anthologies of Southern life histories that have only recently resurfaced in scholarly monographs (Hirsch 147-48).

Federal writers involved in the Communist Party included, among others, Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, Meridel Le Sueur, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, John Steinbeck, Tillie Olsen, and Anzia Yezierska. While many of these writers left the party and some renounced socialism, many remained committed socialists and most remained critical of capitalism, convinced a socialist alternative was necessary. Like other organizations deemed subversive, the FWP fell victim to the combined impact of Stalinism, reversals of Soviet policy, anticommunist politics, and the war effort, surviving only in attenuated form as the Writers' Program from 1939 until its total demise in 1941. Based on evaluations of the FWP guides by critics like Alfred Kazin and Henry Steele Commager, Jerrold Hirsch assures us that the guides exemplify "the literature of rediscovery and cultural nationalism" and that "[n] one of [these critics] noted anything radical" in them. Ironically, in defending the FWP against anti-communist attacks, which he describes as "a mode of discourse for voicing a rejection of the political and cultural values of the New Deal" (198), Hirsch suppresses a crucial element of their cultural and literary orientation. While the guides never overtly critiqued capitalism or promoted communism, many of the writers belonged to the Communist Party or literary groups it sponsored. They were informed by political debates in the *New Masses* and an emergent proletarian literature. Many others were influenced—if not inspired—by the social commitments, theories, and achievements of the literary left.

The significance of this literary history for the emerging field of community writing is complex. Very much like contemporary calls to support the writing of underrepresented groups from homeless people to incarcerated men and women, Mike Gold and his comrades encouraged young, working class writers—hoboes, peddlers, schoolteachers, stenographers, steelworkers, miners, and sailors—to tell "strike stories, prison stories, and work stories" (Homberger 229). Yet the historical antecedent of the *New Masses* has been dismissed as a "mindless crudity...a direct consequence of the Stalinist line on cultural matters" (Howe and Coser, qtd. in Peck 386) or altogether erased from our collective memory by critiques of Stalinism from the left and the right, a pervasive culture of Cold War anticommunism that pushed progressive-minded scholars like Burke to adopt, at best, more moderate, politically neutral positions, and FBI and CIA operations that systematically destroyed left parties and social movements. Wald notes the impact of the Cold War on proletarian avant-garde writers who faded from public awareness except in "the underground streams of the remnants of the Left tradition and Bohemia," concluding: "This led to a speedy judgment in 1950s academe as to the fleeting quality of their attainments, and the careful reconstruction of the Great Depression as an aberrant time of misguided hopes.... The traditional Communist vision of the artist exalted by commitment became transmogrified into a myth of poetry debased by politics" (324).

Folsom remarks that when the League disappeared in 1942, "[L]iterature became more private and hence less troublesome to upholders of the status quo. Public writing dealing with great themes became something of an oddity in the literary marketplace. Such writing would have to wait for another era.... Writers

would have to find channels that do not now exist, through which words can flow freely between their producers and their consumers” (247). The 1930s literary left and the radical context in which it emerged anticipates yet confounds the possibilities for twenty-first century community writing to engage new writers to tell their own and others’ stories of the homeless, prisoners, refugees, the jobless, immigrants, people of color, the displaced, and the dispossessed. In some ways, the volatile politics of the twenty-first century, punctuated by rightwing demagoguery, parallels the rise of fascism in the 1930s. Yet in this interregnum, our sponsors are the corporatized entities that pay our salaries. Revolutionary challenges to capitalism have largely derailed, and nascent movements for social justice from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter have faltered. Rather than suggest that community writing impossibly remake itself in the image of the 1930s literary left, I hope rather to rouse us to become “more troublesome to the upholders of the status quo.” For a start, we might 1) work collectively to build infrastructures for community writing outside as well as inside university walls; 2) form alliances with emerging social justice and labor movements; and 3) create public spaces and channels of communication, education, art, and activism in anticipation of another revolutionary era to come. To end where I began, in Mike Gold’s words, “Write. Persist. Struggle”.

Notes

1. Although my emphasis is on the 1930s, the narrative of the literary left in this period starts a decade earlier and continues into the 1940s.
2. So many writers of all nationalities, including American, fought in the Spanish Civil War that it became known as the “writers’ war.” Yet when Americans who had participated in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade joined the U.S. military to fight in World War II, they were relegated to noncombat, marginal positions and labeled “premature fascists.”
3. During the period from its inception in 1919 to 1923, the CPUSA was rife with factional struggles and external attacks by state and federal governments and the FBI, forcing it underground until 1924. For an excellent analysis of the impact of McCarthyism, see Schrecker.
4. Emerging in the wake of the 2008 crash, *Writing Democracy* was inspired by the literary achievements and economic relief offered by the Federal Writers’ Project and the possibility of a new twenty-first century Works Progress Administration (see Carter and Mutnick).
5. The clubs were named after the poet, journalist, and revolutionary John Reed, author of *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919) and one of the founders of the Communist Party of America.
6. The 2015 film *Trumbo*, though excellent in many respects, is a good case in point of how the Communist Party is erased from cultural history.
7. Foley bases this evaluation on Edward Seaver’s address to the 1935 Congress, titled “What Is a Proletarian Novel? Notes Toward a Definition.”

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