

[Working through the Federal Writers' Project: Labor, Place, Archive, and Representation](#)

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Call for Papers

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Area Studies, Labor History / Studies, Literature, Cultural History / Studies, Oral History

This proposed volume of interdisciplinary essays reexamines the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) as a labor project. We are working with a publisher to feature this book, *Working through the Federal Writers' Project: Labor, Place, Archive, and Representation*, as part of a potential series on the FWP, on the burgeoning field of FWP studies, and on how FWP studies fits in the larger framework of labor studies. Labor, in this sense, is not a narrow category. It encompasses trade unions, working conditions, labor power, political economy, and the everyday reality of working lives. Identification with labor enabled FWP writers to take a perspective on figures in a landscape that otherwise went unnoticed—men and women, some of them the formerly enslaved, at work across the U.S., including industrial laborers, domestic workers, and agricultural workers. Instead of treating those figures as objects, many FWP writers were able to air their voices in ways that promoted them as subjects, makers of democracy in a world threatened then, as now, by the rise of fascism. At the same time, FWP writers understood their work as a form of labor. Many writers in the FWP exchanged revolutionary ideas about anti-racist and pro-labor struggles, creating a body of literature that depicts the diversity of American life while revealing the faultlines of U.S. racism and class division.

We invite examinations of the FWP archives and life histories housed at the Library of Congress as well as the American Guide Series and literary works by federal writers that consider these primary texts through the filter of labor. How did the FWP capture the voices of working people, both men and women? In what ways did the FWP provide emerging writers, including Black, female, and working-class writers, an opportunity to publish? In what ways did the FWP tacitly elicit stories of work—industrial, agricultural, and domestic—that celebrated narratives of endurance and agency? Finally, how did the FWP and its writers navigate and/or embrace anti-racist and pro-labor struggles in the project?

As the title suggests, working through the FWP requires us to sift and wrestle with the past.

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- What stories of work and labor do the archives tell? Whose stories are prioritized?
- How do the life histories and narratives of formerly enslaved people work in and against erasure? What do these stories reveal about tensions between the formerly enslaved and the labor unions that excluded them?
- What can we learn in the archives about the history of “the work ethic” in the U.S., how it shapes perceptions of labor unions, and the way it gets mobilized for race and class narratives in the American imagination?
- How did the writers’ work across a variety of genres propel new literary experiments in the decades that followed?
- What is the FWP’s radical potential and its relationship to proletarian literature?
- How was the FWP influenced by communists, anarchists, socialists, and John Reed Clubs, what Michael Denning called the “cultural front”?
- In what ways has the representation of ethnicity and indigeneity been overlooked in the project?
- How was labor solidarity undermined by Jim Crow in the FWP?
- What role did sexuality and gender play in the project’s workforce and production of archival records? How did women reimagine their roles following the Great Depression?

Reexamining the FWP as a labor project suggests a parallel between the 1930s and our own moment, in which capitalists squeeze value from the precariously underemployed and overworked. The realities of unpaid/unrecognized labor, including dependent-care/family care and domestic work (either for hire or not), invites a consideration of future representations of work and worker’s lives, particularly given the renewed struggle for unionization and emerging multiracial class solidarity today.

The editors invite proposals (200-400 word abstracts) for chapters in the range of 5000-7000 words from scholars of American studies, working-class studies, U.S. labor history, ethnic studies, composition studies, and any others that intersect with the study of the FWP.

Deadlines:

- for chapter proposals: May 31, 2023
- for full chapter submission: September 15, 2023

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Send proposals to the co-editors by email at fwplabor@gmail.com

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Michele Fazio is Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. She co-edited the *Routledge International Handbook of Working-Class Studies* (2021) and is a former president of the Working-Class Studies Association. She has published essays on working-class literature and culture.

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