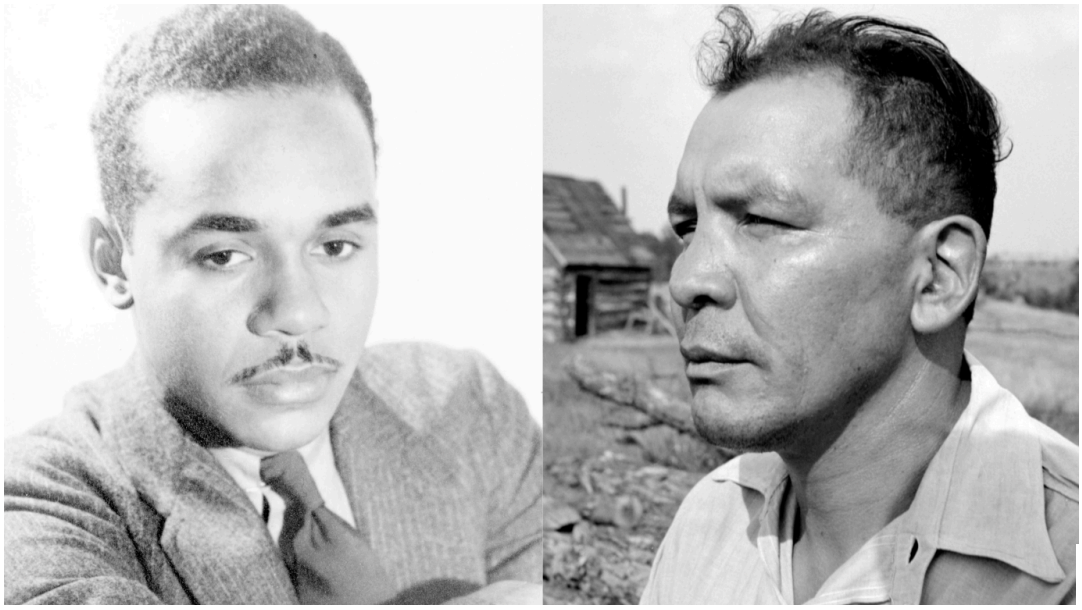
How the Federal Writers' Project Shaped a Generation of Authors



DAVID A. TAYLOR

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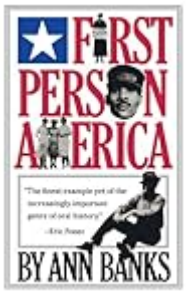
When the marble-columned entrance to the Library of Congress rose before me one morning this summer, it felt welcoming. I had come for a one-day symposium on the 1930s Federal Writers' Project and the New Deal's legacy, and would have the honor of speaking on one of the panels. There I was amazed by a dynamic group of young speakers who are leading a surge in research and practice of oral history and its creative offshoots. This was not what I expected for an event commemorating an agency that expired 80 years ago.

Murray, and **Herbert Denton** at the Library of Congress, a job he fits in alongside teaching at the University of the District of Columbia and another with the D.C. Oral History Collaborative. Benji speaks passionately about Ellison's early work in oral history with the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), before his fame with *Invisible Man*. But he can speak just as passionately about the ongoing efforts by the Oral History Collaborative to give the residents of D.C. the skills and space to document their own experience and neighborhoods.

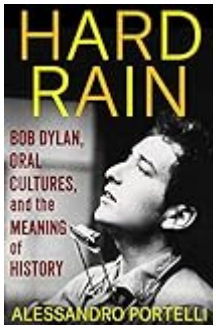
"I had read *Invisible Man* in the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college. I reread it. I got obsessed with it," de la Piedra said at the Library. "Basically, reading Ralph Ellison totally transformed me and gave me a sense of myself, really as an American. I'm the first in my family to be born in the U.S. I'm a first generation American."



De la Piedra entered Columbia's graduate program in oral history, searching for a way to work Ellison into his thesis. But Ellison's years with the FWP, documenting the life stories of Harlem residents he met and recording children's songs on playgrounds, weren't taught in the coursework there. De la Piedra discovered the connection on his own in the archive. He located **Ann Banks**, who back in the 1970s had sifted through the FWP files in the Library of Congress for her book, *First-Person America.* Banks had performed the herculean task of finding gems stuffed into file cabinets in an un-air-conditioned storeroom, and then pursuing their connections with FWP authors still alive,

For Ellison, the FWP proved an education in art and empathy. On the New York City staff, he had taken a variety of assignments, all involving research on New York history. "And once you're into New York history, you're into American history, and then you're into Negro history, like it's all tied together," de la Piedra said. Oral history led Ellison to that understanding. "I just found that really inspiring."

The current cohort studying that history gives new focus to the FWP's story of documenting communities, especially communities of color in a time of heightened inequality and change. Most of the presenters had contributed essays to a new book, *Rewriting America: New Essays on the Federal Writers' Project*, edited by **Sara Rutkowski**. The projects discussed included the COVID-19 Writers Project, centered in Brooklyn and led by **C. Zawadi Morris**, publisher of BK Reader. Morris's video presentation highlighted the inequalities and polarization underscored by the pandemic in longstanding conditions in American society.



Oral historian **Alessandro Portelli** centered the aural significance of the FWP in his keynote, when he said really the FWP was more of a "huge listening project," gathering the unwritten stories of Americans. He observed in his book, *Hard Rain*, about protest music and oral history, that **Bob Dylan**'s "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" and the English ballad "Lord Randal," from another age, represent a "dialogue between equals." The 1962 song is not privileged

can open up something else: "a more complex understanding and a deeper enjoyment of both."

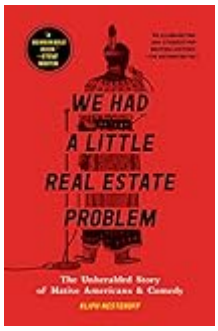
That's what we gain from fresh accounts of the voices in the FWP alongside those of our time.

Like de la Piedra, I was drawn to the FWP by sympathy for those jobless scribes who approached their task in the 1930s with all the uncertainty of freelance work. For two decades, I've written about the FWP for public audiences in essays, articles, and the 2009 book *Soul of a People*, as well as its companion documentary of the same name, directed by **Andrea Kalin**.

In my own talk at the symposium, I introduced a new podcast that Andrea's team at Spark Media and I are launching on the FWP called *The People's Recorder*, funded with grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the state humanities councils of California, Florida, Nebraska, Virginia, and Wisconsin. The podcast is about the people of the FWP, what they achieved, where it fell short, and what it means today. Each episode traces stories of a few individuals as a lens for that history, including poet **Kiki Petrosino** and **Zora Neale Hurston**.

> In 1939, Hurston led a tour of Florida's Gulf Coast for the Project, producing a rich collection of field recordings. Some of the songs she helped record, like the Bahamian

inexperienced white editors), she found a way to leverage support for indelible ethnographic work. She harnessed the power of the Library of Congress and its state-of-the-art recording equipment (a massive turntable that took two men to carry) and brought that into impoverished communities and work camps she knew on the Gulf Coast. We hear her legacy in Florida-based historian **Tameka Hobbs**, author of *Democracy Abroad, Lynching at Home*, speaking about oral history and Black communities in Florida now.



In another episode we'll hear about a local innovation in Wisconsin that led to the Oneida community, a branch of the Iroquois, documenting their own oral history. After Project worker **Oscar Archiquette** and others on staff recorded stories of Oneida elders in their language, a new generation of Oneida, including **Gordon McLester**, were inspired to continue the work of cultural preservationG by conducting WPA-style oral history interviews on videotape in the 1990s. McLester too passed on a sense of history and humor to another generation, including a baseball player he coached named **Charlie Hill**, who went on to become the first Native comedian to perform before a national audience on the *Tonight Show* (a story told in **Kliph Nesteroff**'s *We Had a Little Real Estate Problem* and the basis for the book's title). Hill turned the history gathered by Archiquette and others—along with their sly humor—to upend stereotypes and tropes about Native Americans.

Ironing" from her 1961 collection *Tell Me a Riddle* ranked among the best stories of the century selected by **Lorrie Moore**. Olsen's time with the Writers' Project is less known.

These stories—of Hurston, Archiquette, McLester, Olsen, and many others—offer a path for considering contemporary issues from a historic distance. So many issues that Americans grappled with in the 1930s are still very much with us. Four decades after the FWP ended, Ralph Ellison joined a panel event at the New York Public Library. As other panelists waxed nostalgic or wry, he finally burst out with the truth he had experienced:

> Let's face it, there is something called official history—perhaps it's only academic. But you couldn't find the truth about *my* background in that history. You could not find the truth about other ethnic groups." And he added, "one of the things that the WPA did [...] is to allow that intermixture between the formal and the folk, The real experience of people as they feel it [...].

It was stirring to hear a similar range of viewpoints during my own visit to the Library of Congress symposium, in what I hope is the start of a continuing dialogue. There, I met the scholar **Maiko Miné**, who had flown from Tokyo just for the day's event. In the *Rewriting America* anthology, she considered that legacy for **Ernest Gaines** when

America?

Another question raised at the symposium was whether the FWP had promoted empathy. Benji de la Piedra responded by way of considering what Ellison had gained from his oral history work. For Ellison, the experience was days spent out on the street, writing down children's rhymes at a school playground or interviewing people on the sidewalk at Eighth Avenue and 125th Street. Then at night he would immerse himself in reading the great American novels. Ellison, he said,

> has a line in an interview where he says [something like] "the rhythms and the idioms coming from my interviewees was straight out of Twain and Henry James." And so your question about empathy gets me to what might be a weird segue, but I think as an oral historian, I have learned how beautiful everybody's speech is. The delight that one can take in how somebody expresses themself. And we might call this vernacular idiomatic. But there's something about the beauty of speech itself, I wonder if that's a way to get people to empathize with the person they're hearing. It's like, "Just enjoy what it sounds like to listen to them," you know? I don't know if that's too off the wall.

It didn't strike me as off the wall at all.

Pictured above: Ralph Ellison (l.) and Oscar Archiquette (r.)

DAVID A. TAYLOR *is the author of six books including the nonfiction Soul of a People, about the WPA writers of the 1930s, and a prize-winning short fiction collection, Success: Stories. His latest book, Cork Wars, is a true story of three immigrant families caught up in World War II. His writing appears in the Washington Post, Oxford American, Science, and Smithsonian, and in documentary films. Soul of a People: Writing America's Story, which he co-produced, was nominated for a Writers Guild Award. He teaches writing with Johns Hopkins University.*

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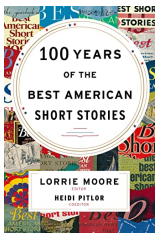

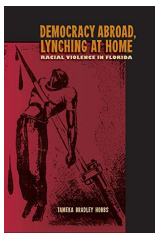

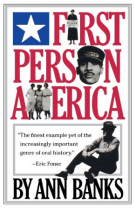

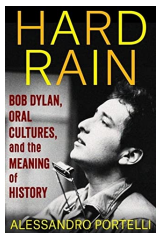

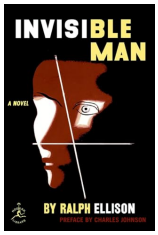

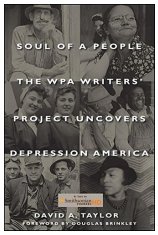

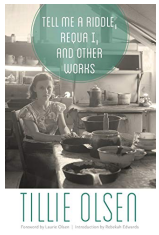

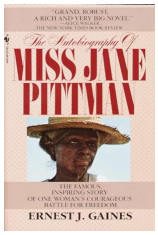

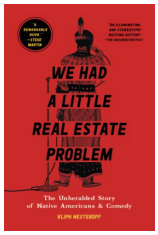

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