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COVER: *Right Face*, members of Sri Lanka's airborne division facing the President of Sri Lanka as they march past during the Victory Day parade held in Colombo; photograph by Dinouk Colombage; 2013

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E PLURIBUS PLENUM: WHY WE (THE PEOPLE) NEED THE HUMANITIES

DAVID SCOBAY

1

I want to speak about the value of the humanities—an issue that may seem well-worn, even threadbare. Not about a crisis in the humanities: I'd argue that that has been vastly overblown. Nor about declining student interest in the humanities, which evidence suggests is much exaggerated. Nor about declines in academic and government funding for the humanities, a problem that is not at all exaggerated. And not particularly in defense of the humanities, although that will be implicit in what I have to say. Rather my concern here is the role of the humanities in contemporary public culture and American civic life—a role that seems to me misunderstood, undervalued, and not at all threadbare. Let me take as my proof-text an extraordinary public-cultural project in which, ten years ago, I was a small participant.

Led by the late Sekou Sundiata, a poet, playwright, musician, performer, and professor of writing at the New School, the America Project explored national identity, power, and citizenship in the wake of 9/11. Organized around a series of campus-based residencies and community partnerships, the project culminated in a multimedia performance piece entitled *the 51st (dream) state*. (At the time, I directed a program on the public role of the arts and humanities at the University of Michigan and helped organize one of those residencies.) To give you a feel for the piece, picture a large stage with Sundiata on the left, declaiming poetry at a music stand, a multiracial quartet of female singers at center stage, around them an electronic jazz combo, and looming behind, a surround of large video screens. The singers open in the dark with a hauntingly beautiful rendition of “The House I Live In”

(the 1943 ballad to racial and religious inclusion first popularized by Frank Sinatra); the projected word *empire* appears above them; and the audience is treated to a complex, funny, searing exploration of American dreams and histories, languages and borders. Sundiata's song- and poem-cycle included Whitmanesque odes to the World Trade Center dead, a scat-poem riff on the word *nigger*, a mixture of jazz, country Western tunes, Indian ragas, and other American musics, and, onscreen behind the performers, video of text, dance solos, and interviews of ordinary and extraordinary Americans.

As astonishing as the piece itself—and I am not doing justice to its sensuous beauty—was the collaborative, iterative process through which it was created. Sundiata developed the America Project over several years of residencies at academic institutions, museums, and performance centers, bringing together distinct constellations of campus and community partners. He would begin by convening community sings, poetry circles, and citizenship potlucks, prompting participants to come with a favorite poem and exchange them, or to sing songs “owned” by different subgroups in the mix—say, “Lift up Your Voice and Sing” and “America the Beautiful” in an interracial setting. That is to say, he began by asking everyone to put others’ words in their mouths and ears and then catalyzed conversation about the themes that emerged, guiding the interchange into thorny issues of policy, identity, and war, returning days later to interview members of the circle. In the final phase of the America Project, completed only after Sundiata’s untimely death in 2007, a national team of producers, curators, artists, and educators created civic engagement materials to accompany future performances and catalyze further conversations and action.

In other words, *the 51st (dream) state* emerged from processes of cultural exchange that moved across ethnoracial, religious, regional, and campus-community boundaries. Sundiata was a master at letting moments of imaginative empathy spark democratic dialogue on hard issues and hard histories. Conversation generated interviews, storytelling, writing, and reflection, which in turn generated materials for songs, poems, dance, and interviews that explored the tensions of being American in a time of catastrophe. The form of the piece enacted this logic of ensemble or collage: it brought together a heteroscape of sources, musical styles, and stories, performing an emergent, contentious America with candor and generosity. *E pluribus* mixtape.

I start with the America Project, because it speaks so eloquently to the role of the humanities in civic and community life. It depended on the public gifts of the humanities: empathy for diverse viewpoints and values, the critical interrogation of power relations, exclusion, and violence in US history, a cosmopolitan mastery of American musical, literary, and linguistic traditions, an ethical commitment to justice and hope. Sundiata deployed these gifts through a particular mode of cultural practice. The America Project didn't reflect holistically on the American experience, distilling a *summa* of our complexities in some master narrative of nationality. It opened an ongoing space of culture making for what Sundiata called the democracy of the imagination. We might say that the America of the America Project is itself a project, imperfect and emergent, a multifold co-creation, an account of our shared life that is aspirational, dynamic, and serial.

2

This isn't of course the only way to think about the humanities in American public life. It's quite different from what might be called the high-national vision of the humanities: one that invests them as the repository and steward of a common American culture, preserving and teaching the core traditions and values that make a diverse people into a civic-minded national community. This more canonical conception is exemplified, for instance, in *The Heart of the Matter*, the 2013 report of the national Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences: "[T]he humanities and social sciences are the heart of the matter, the keeper of the republic," the report proclaims, "a source of national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment and the ideals we hold in common." Convened by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Commission makes its case for "the importance of the humanities and social sciences to the future of our nation" by

. . . identif[ying] three overarching goals: 1) to educate Americans in the knowledge, skills, and understanding they will need to thrive in a twenty-first-century democracy; 2) to foster a society that is innovative, competitive, and strong; and 3) to equip the nation for leadership in an interconnected world.

In pursuit of these goals, *The Heart of the Matter* proposes an ambitious range of cultural policies, educational standards, and public funding aimed at citizenship preparation, cultural preservation, and leadership development.

I might want to tweak the rhetoric of the report a little, but let me be clear: the high-national model has been a valuable, durable means of situating the place of the humanities in public life. To be sure, it can sometimes serve as the basis for nationalist apologetics, but it has also engaged the contradictions and injustices of the American experience with critical judgment and ethical passion. (Martin Luther King deploys it to great effect on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in his “I Have a Dream” address.) It seems to me a necessary part of any conversation about the public role of the humanities: necessary but not sufficient. For especially at times of crisis, when (as Sundiata understood) the very word *America* is up for grabs, we need the humanities to do different kinds of public work, to catalyze other forms of culture making.

So what is it that gets left out of the high-national discourse of cultural stewardship, responsible citizenship, and informed leadership? We might begin with that most canonical of texts: the Preamble to the US Constitution. *The Heart of the Matter* makes a powerful case for the efficacy of the humanities in advancing many of the goals famously enumerated in the Preamble: “insuring domestic tranquility, providing for the common defense, promoting the general welfare, and securing the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” It calls for the humanities to advance a national public sphere already defined by such shared goals and needs. Yet what is missing is the role of the humanities in constituting this public life in the first place—in constituting the “we the people” that forms the antecedent to all that follows.

I want to dwell on that mysterious opening phrase, *we the people*, the most enigmatic and consequential words in the Constitution, upon which its whole legitimacy depends. Literary and legal scholars have remarked on the foundational sleight of hand hidden in the phrase: there simply was no *we the people*, no sovereign collective with the authority to reorganize the machinery of its self-government. *We the people* was invented with and through the act of constituting its government: it was an aspirational project, a “dream-state” in Sundiata’s wonderful phrase, called into existence by the performative utterance of saying its own name and claiming the right to

ratify its own existence. And—being aspirational—it is essentially ongoing and incomplete. It is a serial project.

How is it that we actually become the collective subject and agent of a common fate, working (and arguing) with people with whom we do not share a common background or common values? How is it that, in a diverse, divided, conflicted, unequal society, mutually ignorant of the real lives of our cohabitants, we become a *we* who can actually provide for the general welfare and pursue the blessings of liberty? This was, it seems to me, the great underlying theme of Sundiata's America Project: the project of becoming *we the people* out of the stew of power, injustice, communal bonds, communal conflicts, and hope that Americans co-inherit. And one key answer to that question is this: we cannot constitute ourselves without the gifts of the humanities.

For the way out of the Constitution's sleight of hand—the alternative to dismissing the Preamble as a tricky, self-legitimizing fiction—is a theory of democratic citizenship that stresses the centrality of culture to American public life. Such a theory treats culture not as a common creed or a closed set of master symbols and canonical texts, but rather as an open, contested, dialogical process of storytelling about ourselves. In this view, culture is a verb, a mode of action, one of the essential activities of a diverse democracy. *Culturing* (or should it be *we-ing*?) is a constitutive medium of public life. The stories, spaces, symbols, and social memories that it creates are indispensable means by which we produce ourselves, ongoingly, as a democratic public. We do that (as Sundiata and his collaborators modeled) by engaging across differences, taking others' words and musics into our mouths and ears, mixing history and empathy and critique, bringing them to bear on our everyday experience, stretching our imagination into the everyday lives of others with whom we share a common fate but not common experiences.

Put another way, the public work of the humanities needs to begin with the *pluribus*, not the *unum*. This is why the genre conventions of *the 51st (dream) state*—the forms of serial, ensemble, montage, mixtape—offer such useful metaphors to figure the process of culture making out of which *we the people* gets co-created. The process is emergent and distributed, weaving the local, the particular, the everyday, into a shared space of storytelling and exchange. The phrase itself—*we the people*—captures this ambiguity of singular and plural, of first-person plurality. The Preamble does not after all

read, “The citizenry of the United States does hereby ordain”—a flatter, less interesting construction. It presents *us* to ourselves paradoxically, as simultaneously compact and manifold, singular and plural, federal and national, a union and yet a not-yet-more perfect union. *E pluribus plenum*.

3

And so it is striking, but perhaps not surprising, that American authors, artists, and culture makers have persistently used the forms of the serial, the gallery, and the ensemble to curate and create—the verbs blend together—hybrid expressions of national identity. John James Audubon’s *The Birds of America*; Mathew Brady’s *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*; Louis Prang’s *American Chromos* (a best-selling lithographic set of landscapes and landmarks that adorned nineteenth-century parlors); the Depression-era *American Guide Series* of the Federal Writers’ Project—all these belong to a robust genre tradition that we might call the national anthology. In part the popularity of the genre was driven by material factors: the rise of imprint technologies, the appeal of subscription marketing. In part, it reflected the sheer sprawl of the national landscape and the dizzying heterogeneity of American communities, which defied canonizing efforts at singular, monumental representation. Writers and artists responded with literary, visual, and journalistic collections that aggregated notable citizens, communities, places, and specimens into national exemplars by placing them in dialogue with and against each other. Unlike bald-eagle engravings, equestrian monuments, and presidential place names—focal symbols aimed at unifying the American heteroscape—these ensembles represented national identity precisely *as* plural and emergent, too overfull and not yet full enough for closure.

It is also striking, and perhaps more surprising, that this tradition has renewed itself in recent public culture making. The digital revolution has transmuted older anthological and serial forms into aggregative platforms, generating inclusively curated collections like the America’s Favorite Poem Project and Story Corps. And at the same time, the culture wars of the post-sixties decades have given the genre of the national anthology a new and salient edge. Audubon, Brady, and even the Federal Writers’ Project had used it to pursue a kind of constructivist populism, building up a shared American identity, iteratively, out of localities, subcultures, and regional

phenomena. By contrast, projects like *the 51st (dream) state* use it to break down national meta-narratives and master symbols that seem all too suffocating, creating ensembles whose gaps and discordances open the space for critical dialogue and emergent voices. The first (literally ground-breaking) example was of course Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans' War Memorial—or more precisely, the hybrid creation of the Wall itself and the collection of commemorative artifacts that visitors spontaneously began to leave there. As Kristen Hass has shown, this joint proliferation of names and things (which draws on popular funerary traditions of giving objects to and for the dead) cracked open the high-national aesthetics of the conventional war memorial. In the face of disunion over the Vietnam War and its legacy, it constituted a new kind of national public, brought together through the ongoing aggregation of personal memories and attachments. The Names Project did similar work, using the creation and curation of personal quilts to convene a citizenry of mourning that made visible the AIDS crisis.

These were America Projects in the richest sense. Like Sundiata's work, they emerged not simply alongside, but in response to and in struggle with dominant traditions of public memory, public art, and civic loyalty. Like Sundiata's work, they engaged in what might be called critical patriotism, using collaborative processes and ensemble genres to explore, but also affirm, our conflicted bonds with(in) the civic community. And like *the 51st (dream) state*, they did this public work by simultaneously looking backward to multiple histories, outward across a diverse, unequal society, and forward toward aspirations for a more perfect union.

What does this have to do with the humanities? It's precisely because our public life is so vexed, so disappointing, and yet so often inspiring, that it requires what the humanities can bring to bear: our capacity to recover and lift up the past, our cultivation of theoretical and ethical reflection, our nurturing of cosmopolitan empathy, our capacity for critique and for generative interpretation that moves beyond critique. These are of course the classic gifts of the humanities, nourished by the traditions of the seminar room, the research archive, or the museum exhibition. We need such traditions, as well as national commissions and endowments that support them and the high-national discourse that affirms their value. But the public role of the humanities also requires the kind of democratic work I've been sketching: work that is community-based, contentious, iterative, and

open-ended, work by which we (the people) summon ourselves and argue with one another. Such work will require new pedagogical, scholarly, and creative practices on the part of academic and cultural institutions and new partnerships between those institutions and the heteroscape of American communities—practices and partnerships that Sundiata’s America Project modeled. If culture is a medium of citizenship, we will need more such projects, exploring (for instance) the hardening red-blue divides in our governance, or environmental justice, or the religious mosaic of American society. We need such projects to pursue the civic ideal of *e pluribus plenum*. Not *out of many, one*, as the Great Seal of the United States memorializes it. But out of many, something full and unfinished.



NOTES

Sekou Sundiata’s extraordinary piece, *the 51st (dream state)*, premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on November 8, 2006. The performance may be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/129036453> (password: dreamstate); warm thanks to MAPP International Productions, which produced the piece and the America Project as a whole, for making it available. Julie Ellison’s essay, “Lyric Citizenship in Post 9/11 Performance: Sekou Sundiata’s *the 51st (dream state)*,” in Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby (eds.), *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 91–113, insightfully discusses Sundiata’s project. My reading of “we the people” and the Preamble to the US Constitution draws on Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere In Eighteenth-Century America* (Harvard University Press, 1990) and Akhil Reed Amar, *The Bill of Rights: Creation and Reconstruction* (Yale University Press, 1998). My account of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the objects left there is greatly indebted to Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (University of California Press, 1998).

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