

Lyric Citizenship in Post 9/11 Performance

Sekou Sundiata's the 51st (dream) state

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Civic engagement is in the air, and it's probably in the drinking water.

—Sekou Sundiata, “Thinking Out Loud: Democracy, Imagination, and Peeps of Color”

In June 2004 Sekou Sundiata addressed a national gathering in Pittsburgh, “Diversity Revisited/A Conversation on Diversity in the Arts.” Sundiata’s speech, “Thinking Out Loud: Democracy, Imagination, and Peeps of Color,” makes explicit the fact that he shared the meeting’s general impatience with the status quo on multiculturalism and that this impatience propelled his turn to the conjoined forces of democracy and imagination. “Democracy,” like “citizenship,” is for him not only a feature of political systems or a matter of state but rather a repositioning of the subject: “a humane social practice that . . . brings together the inner need for the freedom to be who you are with the outer need for a social and political and economic ecology . . . for the whole human being.”¹ Sundiata’s “humane social practice” emerged from his weariness with the politics of protest and the politics of administered diversity in favor of citizenship in a changed key, “new ways of imagining and acting in the world.”² He urged a shift from diversity to democracy and from color to difference: “When I say ‘diversity’ I am not talking about a diversity of colors but a democracy of ideas as expressed through different cultures.” And he establishes “generous imaginings,” differently voiced, as the defining practice

of citizens. “Imagination,” then, is an epistemological transaction that makes possible “knowledge about the weight and complexity of others”: “Democracy: You can’t keep it unless you give it away. But you cannot have it, let alone practice it, without a willing and robust imagination because it is through the imagination that we can begin to . . . see the world through eyes other than our own.” Sundiata’s translational imagination connects “the private realm of the individual mind and the social realm of public life.” The imagination is “a necessary and sacred space,” a space of “conjuring,” but also a space located “within material borders” and “shaped . . . by the material world.”³

I call this imaginative shift, this change in the construction of a possible or aspirational national subject, “lyric citizenship.” This term points to—and, I hope, evokes and describes—new practices or performances of democratic citizenship that are increasingly likely to be mediated by cultural activities. More specifically, these practices are rooted in older histories of poetry, civic culture, and the politics of hope as framed by African American thinkers. Performances that are sociably crafted with a civic intent communicate through a preoccupation with memory and dream as well as through a quest for public agency. They are locally embedded, translocally networked, and collaboratively made. They are lyrical and pragmatic. Their aesthetic of civic engagement arises from and responds to changes in public and counterpublic spheres.

Lyric citizenship, as demonstrated by Sundiata’s *the 51st (dream) state*, marks a shift in the domain of expressive culture and the arts from “the piece”—a work of art, an exhibition, a performance—to “the project,” which connects the work and its community of creators, organizers, and sponsors to broader and deeper forms of public participation. This participatory ethos, furthermore, declares the civic—the shared experience of citizenship—as a primary goal. The project foregrounds public narrative as a meaning-making practice that draws on enactments and reenactments of citizen voices. Subsuming “the piece” into “the project” moves us away from other traditional and contemporary notions of the aesthetic. Whereas the piece is set up to generate the space of private consumption or the parallel play of public spectatorship, the project is not only dialogically received but also, in one way or another, publicly made. The publicly engaged cultural project is where the politics of hope, the questioning of genre, and lyrical performance converge.

From Piece to Project: Genres of Engagement

The project involves expanded organizational relationships that flow from the civic purposes of the piece. Through project-specific relationships with scholars and activists, nonprofit organizations, local arts presenters, and university programs, the creative team working on the piece (the performance work itself) nurtures zones of democratic encounter where publics come into being. The aesthetics of the project have a horizontal or spatial dimension; therefore, they also have a defining temporality. The life of the project happens “before,” “in,” and “after” the “piece.” The world of the project may be brief or enduring; it may be characterized by alliances rooted in a broadly shared social vision or by single-issue coalitions or, indeed, by sharp differences in interest and opinion. Whatever the particular variations, the project grows up around the piece as an intentional part of its meaning.

The shift from artistic “piece” to cultural “project” is fundamental to performances of the kind represented by Sundiata’s *51st (dream) state*. It is also essential to the efforts of a whole host of organizations. Many of these are performing arts organizations, like the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, known for its participatory community dance practice, and Amherst’s New WORLD Theater and its Project 2050 youth initiative.⁴ The model of the participatory cultural project, however, pervades many cultural domains. In performance and other artistic domains, collaborative projects in theater, poetry, public history, public art, education, and cultural tourism are being carried out by arts and presenting organizations, community development sites such as Houston’s Project Row Houses and Philadelphia’s Village of the Arts and Humanities, museums, libraries, and a growing number of campus-based programs.⁵ Collaborations among these organizations have been fostered by national associations committed to such partnerships, including *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, the International Coalition of Historic Sites of Conscience, and the much-missed Community Arts Network.

The piece/project relationship is central both to the aesthetics of community-engaged performance and to emerging interpretive and critical approaches to it. Cultural critics have called for altered interpretive practices that are adequate to these undertakings, a set of democratizing interventions motivated by “a critique or undoing of the confinements of academic professionalism.”⁶ A body of work is forming around this summons. As Suzanne Lacey argues, “new genre public art” (an analogous development

in the arena of the visual arts) needs critical strategies that are adequate to participatory, process-intensive works.⁷

I take this distinction between piece and project from an interview with Sekou Sundiata, with whom I collaborated for a number of years. My analysis in this essay of Sundiata's *the 51st (dream) state* aims to open a dialogue between a new, poetry-intensive performance work and scholars of the literary humanities. Until his death in 2007, Sundiata shaped the civic engagement movement in the arts and higher education as a common undertaking of poets and musicians, and new networks taking shape around public cultural institutions, nonprofit organizations, and university programs.

Conceived by Sundiata, a New York poet and theater artist, as a post-9/11 contemplation of America's national identity, its power in the world, and its guiding mythologies, *the 51st (dream) state* was part of a broader initiative, The America Project. As the name makes clear, the relationship between "piece" and "project" was foundational. The America Project had two components. The first was the creation and performance of *the 51st (dream) state*, a multimedia "oratorio" or music theater work in which Sundiata played the central role of the Poet. The second related to public engagement activities organized through the numerous developmental and performance residencies of *the 51st (dream) state*. Part of the "research-to-performance" strategy that Sundiata initiated in 2002, these events surrounded the project, occurring before, during and after the performance itself. They were designed to involve local clusters of campus programs and community organizations, artists, scholars, activists, and interested citizens in dialogues about citizenship.

The residencies took Sundiata and other members of the company to sites all over the country, including, for example, Austin's Free Minds Program (an adaptation of the Clemente Course in the Humanities); the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan; the orientation program for first-year students at Lafayette College; Zeiterion Theater in New Bedford, Massachusetts; Aaron Davis Hall (now Harlem Stage); and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Sundiata led numerous "poetry circles" and "citizenship cabarets," conducted interviews, and attended potluck dinners, panels, and forums designed to spark ideas on critical patriotism ("the opposite of uncritical patriotism," as Gladstone Hutchinson of Lafayette College put it).⁸ Simultaneously, the project extended to a pedagogical model developed through The America Project course at the New School University, where Sundiata was a faculty member, and elaborated on other

campuses. Some elements of these public or “project” interactions (videotaped interviews, for example) worked their way into *the 51st (dream) state*. This work was Sundiata’s most fully theorized and most dramatically realized model of a performance piece located within a project. The project becomes the vehicle for the social imagination, the medium (in turn) for the democratic experience of intercultural citizenship.

The model for *the 51st (dream) state* evolved from Sundiata’s earlier diasporic collaborations with trombonist Craig Harris in the 1990s.⁹ Reading *the 51st (dream) state* in the context of Sundiata and Harris’s precursor works helps us to follow the development of Sundiata’s explicit commitment to the imagination—embodied in the project—as an element of civic engagement. A genealogy of the work enables us to track the change from theater piece to civic engagement project, effected through Sundiata’s performance works of 2000–2002. The origins of *the 51st (dream) state* lie in these earlier projects, especially *Udu* (2000), which evolved in turn from *The Return of Elijah* (1996).¹⁰

The Return of Elijah began as a collaboration with New WORLD Theater, founded in Amherst in 1979 “as an anti-racist, multiracial project . . . dedicated to the work of artists of color.”¹¹ Sundiata and Harris conceived of *Elijah* as a ‘time-traveling’ adaptation of *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, 1789*. “The form of the work” was “a hybrid that draws on opera, music theater, and oratorio.”¹² *Udu* linked Africa and America, the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, and ultimately a theater company, a couple of nonprofit organizations, and some academics. Sundiata and Harris engaged Senegalese percussionists and contemporary antislavery organizations in a series of interactions that led to prescient experiments with genre, voice, and time. The tonal and formal consequences of “conversations with history” were at the center of the experiments that joined what Eleanor Traylor calls “lyric evocation” with what Angela Davis terms “aesthetic agency.”¹³

The turn from piece to project came as *Elijah* was evolving into *Udu*. Sundiata and Harris began to link their reimagining of Equiano’s narrative—rendered orally, instrumentally, and through gesture—to contemporary human rights movements. Both collaborators had responded strongly to Samuel Cotton’s *The Silent Terror: A Journey Into Contemporary African Slavery* (1999). Cotton, who died in 2004, was a documentary filmmaker who later organized the Coalition Against Slavery in Mauritania and Sudan (CASMAS).¹⁴ His book offered a point of engagement for Sundiata and Harris that enabled both the transhistorical and the transnational dimensions

of the work to become more purposeful through specific organizational connections in New York.

This shift to relationship building with activist networks had consequences for the new work, *Udu*. Harris and Sundiata felt that “there was still something missing” from *Elijah*, “something we could feel but could not name.” After reading *The Silent Terror*, Sundiata recalled, they knew what it was: “What do we, as artists, have to say about our own life and times? As African Americans, how do we feel and think about slavery that is not our own experience in the west? . . . These new issues challenged the received narrative about slavery . . . in a way that disturbed us deeply. . . . This was a source of our ‘trouble in mind’ that led to a . . . fundamental change in the work.”¹⁵ *Udu* was the generative predecessor of *the 51st (dream) state* because decisions about character, voice, and story were intertwined with finding the work’s public purpose. Sundiata and Harris observed that when “we began to work with the new story, we . . . made contact with the author of *Silent Terror* as well as former slaves and other people doing abolitionist work here in the United States. They have agreed to participate in humanities activities linked to performances as the piece travels. The ‘piece’ has evolved into a project.”¹⁶ *Udu* thus yielded Sundiata’s model for engaged performance, a “piece” embedded within a “project,” and took final form in 2000, a year before the events of 9/11 would provoke Sundiata’s *The America Project*.

The America Project

The 51st (dream) state debuted at Stanford in 2006, eighteen months before Sundiata’s death at fifty-eight in July 2007. This work exemplifies the recent turn to the lyric imagination of democracy—a turn begun long before 9/11, and with deep historical roots, but more energetically named and claimed after that date.¹⁷ The show combined the speaking “Poet,” a quartet of singers, several instrumentalists, and projected video of a solo dance performance and several interviews, along with still photography and clips from television news or other image sources.

Sundiata began *the 51st (dream) state* and *The America Project* in a period of intensive creative work in response to the events of 9/11, the “War on Terror,” and, later, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina,¹⁸ the “federal flood”: “Those events triggered a running commentary, an unsettling conversation with myself to understand what it means to be an American.”¹⁹ Imagining,

witnessing, dreaming, remembering: these are both The America Project's methods of interpersonal encounter and the content of *the 51st (dream) state*. "I felt that I was in a blind spot right after 9/11 and I was looking for a clearing," Sundiata reflected in an interview, "and I set out then to develop a way to see."²⁰ "America," then, was to be reseen through local ethnographies of national feeling organized by a black artist.

The America Project created multiple intimate expressive publics that were interested—and invested—in *the 51st (dream) state*. Community events—including those organized around reading, performing, and meditating on poetry—had a unique power for those attending them. A poetics of public work grew up around such practices. Gatherings took place in a state capital, a community arts center, someone's home, a small theater, a library, or a classroom.²¹ The text du jour might be Suheir Hammad's "First Writing Since," the Declaration of Independence, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," or Robert Frost's "Mending Wall." Each event in the halo of engagement surrounding *the 51st (dream) state* had the potential, at least, for the transitory but unforgettable experience of democratic culture.

Participants in many of these events described a sense of entering what Sharon Cameron has called lyric time. *Lyric time* is Cameron's term for the radically *unpublic* relationship between "temporal deprivation and immortal recompense" in Emily Dickinson's poems—a temporality that, for Cameron, dramatizes the generic features of the lyric poem.²² I borrow—and alter—this evocative term for two reasons: its expressive power and its usefulness in both marking and disrupting the affinity of The America Project with lyric poetry. There are important differences between Cameron's use of the term and my application of it to these very different scenes of poetry, even as the quality of lyric is deeply shared between lyric poetry as habitually defined and the lyricism that characterizes *the 51st (dream) state* and The America Project.

Lyric citizenship, in this altered sense, is a term that I propose in order to emphasize the links between publicness, eloquence, empathy, and self that Sundiata's project modeled. Mobilizing the lyric voice for citizenship is a counterintuitive critical move, given the association of the lyric tradition with the inward and the private. Poetry is "of the nature of soliloquy," Mill wrote in one of the most insistently binary constructions of poetry as private and rhetoric ("eloquence") as public. If "eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*." If eloquence flows from contact with the "outward and everyday world," Mill concluded, then poetry avoids such "intercourse" in "solitude."²³ Nonetheless, lyric citizenship is not an oxymoron.

Asked in Minneapolis, “What do you hope happens here when you leave?” Sundiata replied, the “intersection of art, humanities and public engagement.” He added, “I lost interest in making work that would just entertain you . . . I want you to feel implicated.”²⁴ Implication, for Sundiata, should not find its voice in the political discourses of complaint, accusation, or (by itself) ideological critique. Rather, he felt, it should yield a constantly questioned, historically aware, emotionally complex identification with and responsibility for “America,” however fraught that position might be. The America Project residencies formed small publics where intersection and implication became a craft. These relatively small gatherings of implicated people supplemented the work’s performances and in many cases generated the audiences for them. The project aimed to create places where careful listening could occur—above all, careful listening about race, a specific kind of “implication.”

Sundiata’s project connected the rise of civic engagement in the cultural sector to the creativity of thinking through race toward an intercultural politics. During a postperformance conversation with community members in Austin, one participant commented: “[I was] struck by . . . [the] indictment that I felt was being made of the us along racial lines, and the indictment was made in casting, so that the evolution of the bodies, and the way the music moved and bumped up against things . . . [the ensemble company] became . . . a kind of utopic vision of what the U.S. might be. And I wonder how people have responded to the racialized world that gets projected.” Sundiata replied, “I wanted very much . . . to be critical about race,” to get past “these cold war terms . . . these black and white terms . . . that’s not my experience in New York, in the classroom or traveling this country. It’s much deeper and more complicated.”²⁵ Racial formation, then, became inseparable from the experiential aesthetics of democratic engagement. This analysis of race pervaded Sundiata’s post-9/11 rereading of his lifelong politics of protest in favor of “a critical citizenship” of intersection and implication. The “multi-arts” logic of *the 51st (dream) state* and the multiethnic, multiracial cast become metaphors for one another and for the identities, individually and collectively, of the audience.²⁶

The unit of Sundiata’s public engagements, his principle microgenre throughout the six years of making and touring *The America Project*, was the story of the “citizenship moment.” Narrating the “citizenship moment” was central to his own classroom practice at the New School University and to the residency events that surrounded his performances.

For Sundiata, being implicated in democracy began with the act of finding language adequate to one's first memory of voting or some other crossing of the threshold into history, civics, public identity, or consciousness of the state. He himself recalled the solemnity of folding the flag as a member of the school honor guard. The citizenship moment story, as modeled by Sundiata, is an anecdote told and retold as a way of locating the individual within the group through the reperformance of a breakthrough episode. A discursive occasion, it may be retold later; referenced by the speaker, the performer, and others; or written about. The importance of the word *moment* as the focal point of Sundiata's invitation to narrative participation in these gatherings underscores the lyric turn that The America Project introduced into civic storytelling. Civic ceremonies and texts, songs and anthems, the news—all of them, in one way or another, forms of voice and often forms of eloquence—recur as the focal points of “citizenship moment” stories.

Robin Grice, a graduate student in a class that was actively engaged in Sundiata's 2005 Michigan residency, recalled the story she told in response to the in-class prompt on the first day of the term—“talk about your citizenship moment.” She wrote later that this moment marked “the first time I would feel . . . profoundly a part of the world . . . as something that could be shaped, influenced, maybe even owned”:

I'd burst into our family's kitchen singing another anthem of sorts. “Say It Loud I'm Black and I'm Proud” hit Milwaukee in the summer of 1968 and as I marched into the house that evening singing at the top of my lungs, I was terrified . . . *terrified* of the reaction the word “black” might bring from a mother who did not tolerate “profanity” . . . or much of anything else . . . a word could go from “bad” to “good” over night . . . [creating] the feeling of history being made right there in our house. Yes, the transition . . . between the street and domestic space releases the energy bound up in the concealed fusion of private and public within the family.²⁷

“Citizenship moment” stories such Grice's form a subset of “public narratives,” which have contributed to the recent aestheticizing of non-arts activities. The “public narrative,” defined by Marshall Ganz for the 2008 Obama campaign as “the story of self,” “the story of us,” and “the story of now,” is thoroughly grounded in the conviction that the self is social and that personal narratives can be publicly exchanged for the public good.

The Participant Guidelines for Camp Obama Colorado, drafted by Ganz, focus on “Telling Your Story of Self” in a personal/public narrative, developed in small-scale working groups. The organizer’s story, according to the guidelines, should connect “self,” “us,” and “now.”²⁸ The narrative should be ready to take door to door, on the road, to the telephones.

The fact that expressive, value-laden, historically precise personal narratives have entered politics should come as no surprise. The storytelling boom is a medium for the fusion of culture, self, and the social. Personal narratives and “life writing” is everywhere: in radio programs like those produced by the StoryCorps radio project; in Photovoice projects that link image, narrative, and community development; in community theaters where plays are built interactively through oral histories, storytelling, or interviews.²⁹ The genre of the reflective essay, ubiquitous in compendia of “best practices” in community-based learning, often urges precisely the integration of personal experience, academic reading, and local community engagement. The public narrative, in sum, has become a “relational dramaturgy,” in David Scobey’s apt phrase, for communities organized around vocalizations of the place- and time-bound intricacy of the individual subject. Sundiata, “called to citizenship in a way I never expected,” was also called to stories lyrically remembered and told: “The only way I could really get a hold of it was to understand personal narrative. . . . The deeper you go into personal narrative, you come out the other side into the collective.”³⁰

Telling the story of a “citizenship moment,” the favored practice of The America Project, conveyed dramas of identity and affiliation. The tellers of “citizenship moment” stories sometimes recalled the epiphanic events that launched their careers as political activists, but ideological contest was not what Sundiata was trying to get at with this practice. The expressive power attributed to personal narratives with civic motives blurred the distinction between narrative and lyrical modes. Story acquired atmospheric, associative, metaphoric, and temporal qualities associated with the discontinuous transitions of poetry. The aesthetic entered public narrative through the literary, the poetic, or even the romantic in tropes of song, memory, haunting, night, wandering, and dream. They allowed individuals and groups to negotiate the passage from social and political criticism to experiences, however ephemeral, of transformative implication. These overtly poetized moments showed what may happen to the political when performed dreamwork becomes part of it.

A Citizen Walks into Citizenship: Reading *the 51st (dream) state*

A key passage in *the 51st (dream) state*, spoken by the Poet as written and played by Sundiata, launches a meditation on the genesis of the work during the apocalyptic, neo-imperial days of the new millennium. The author's own medical crises (a kidney transplant followed by a car accident in which he sustained a broken neck) preceded the national traumas of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Lyrical hope works "against all gravity" for an audience that is "already old" and deeply skeptical:

A citizen walks into a Citizenship looking for directions as the drama opens in a New American Theater with on a view from the 9th Ward that looks out on Speed, an ancient word for a future that is Always Now, a millennium already old and half done. These are the rules to engage this space . . .

A poet addresses the podium, calibrates her papers and speaks her words into the room where against all gravity they float: *The Scale of Empire*. War she says, but what she means is Wars, but it doesn't seem to matter which one. The audience clears its throat and checks its pockets.³¹

The poet who doubts both the standard discourses of the leftist intellectual and those of the canonical American lyric tries to balance suspicion and hope. This involves altering his or her political language, a process that *the 51st (dream) state* both performs and explains:

In the early days of the Aftermath
I was in hiding
from the lost army of protest
calling from the 20th century
for something boisterous and skinny
on the page

Sundiata's "American feelings" emerged after 9/11 as part of the labor of renegotiating his "strange, hyphenated relation to America" as an African American.³² "I'm done marching," Sundiata said during a postperformance community conversation in Austin: "I didn't want people to respond in the language of debate, rhetoric, and staking out a position."³³ For most of his

“writing life,” he felt himself to be “the un-American American” who wrote “from the outside looking in.” But in “the aftermath,” he mused, “it seems that I’m being forced . . . to invent what it means to be an American again”: “What did it mean for me to be making art at this time, what did it mean for me as an African American man to be asking these questions?” In *the 51st (dream) state*, the Poet begins with the physics of writing. Trauma rips open the depths and sends poetry on a search for roots in the body, in craft (of hand and eye) and in the elements of place:

I began my heresy
with the scratch and whisper
of Number 2 lead
spelling out the opening line
from instinct to hand to eye
earth water fire air

The refrain, “Earth, water, fire, air” puts a special emphasis on “air” as the attenuated social space through which voice and music travel. Updated, “air” becomes “airwaves”: “America come across the airwaves and empties its soul like a compulsive talker in the passenger seat explaining what it means to be a way of life.” Or, in an optative lift,

Everybody’s dreaming a different dream. . . .
The lines are open. We are in the air!

Sundiata took seriously the word “dream” in his title. Much of *the 51st (dream) state* takes place at night, under the moon, to the tune of the Moonlight Sonata, or in daydream. Honest language,” the Poet reminds us, is neither simple nor straightforward. It embraces the surreal, nocturnal recycling of American tongues—America on the road and on the radio. Being in the air and on the road are equally spaced out conditions and equally American geographies. It takes the suspended animation or parallel play of “quiet hours on the Interstate” to figure out “what a citizen thinks/about citizenship.” What a citizen thinks comes down, not to a political proposition, but to the feedback loop of song. Poetry constructs American geography, while American landscapes inhabit the Poet: “If you sing to the mountains / the mountains will sing to the valley in you . . . / If you sing to the highway; the highway will find/ the highway in you.”

Unabashedly indulging the romanticism of performed citizenship, the video projection shows a solo black dancer, David Thomson, as the visual manifestation of the Poet's self-making in the dreamlike poise of black-and-white projection. On the multiple projection screens that formed the backdrop of the set, dance introduces a second space of lyrical gesture. Thomson's performance of entranced reflection bespeaks the absorption of a man "thinking out loud" with his body, dancing a pathway through lyric time. This dance is one of many passages in the performance when visible interiority and audible publicness merge.

The race work of *the 51st (dream) state* is inextricable from the conviction that "what's missing and gone is half the story." Lyric citizenship helps to fill in the gaps through performances that often rely on lyric modes, which are spoken, sung, orchestrated, danced, and visualized. Sundiata, like the other writers I discuss in the conclusion, purchases hope through an aesthetic practice with haunted histories. In other words, the uncanny emotions of historical memory mediate the relationship between oppositional negativity and democratic hope. Hospitalized in Brooklyn during 9/11, a kind of hopeful civics of mortality had already come to him as he watched develop, among "all the patients, an absurd and poetic unit of possibility."³⁴ Thus Sundiata already felt close to the "thin places" of the world.³⁵

In *the 51st (dream) state*, the chronically ill body of *Blessing the Boats*, which was Sundiata's one-man show about his kidney transplant, enters public space and time through these "thin places":

I follow horse trails
 through secret pathways
 indigenous ghost caves
 and African Burial Grounds . . .
 the Untouchables and Enchanters doo wop
 and doo-rag in a spot of starlight
 like they don't know they're dead
 as if to say See that star, see that light?
 This is what we always wanted to be.

Here the broken body meets the broken city, where "what's below the surface, the underlife of the city, history below the ground, animates the city day to day." Buried histories surfaced and the "mineral" life of body and earth commingled.³⁶ This is Whitman's "The Sleepers" by way of "The Tunnel" section of Hart Crane's *The Bridge*. There Crane, wandering in

“interborough fissures of the mind,” addresses the specter of Edgar Allan Poe as the subway car is “rivered under streets / and rivers.”³⁷ But it is equally Whitman by way of June Jordan, Sundiata’s college creative writing teacher and author of “He’s Our Shakespeare: So why is America ambivalent about Whitman?”³⁸

In Sundiata’s script, the Poet claims imaginative access to a subsurface world, the subterranean burial grounds of Manhattan exposed through Ground Zero. Not narrated in the script, but told many times by Sundiata as one of his public narratives—showing once again that the civic is inseparable from the familial—was the story of his great-grandfather’s lynching in South Carolina. He heard this story from his aunts only in late middle age. The lynching occurred at a place that he remembered other children pointing out to him during family visits as haunted or taboo.³⁹ Patricia Yaeger invites us to consider “geography as ghost story,” suggesting that the strangeness of literary topographies reveals the “pressure of what is hidden, encrypted, repressed, or unspoken in global and local histories.” Space “possesses a history”—often a racialized history—that is manifest “as a series of folds and pockets, as the dimensional incorporation and exhalation of time.”⁴⁰

The 51st (dream) state is set in just such a place. The history of racism “cures” the schoolboy of any facile loyalties to “America, the Beautiful” (W. E. B. Du Bois’s sardonic riff on “My Country ’Tis of Thee” is lurking here somewhere),⁴¹ and this is precisely what allows the “beautiful” and the lyrical to enter through tragic “witness” in Lower Manhattan:

through history’s anesthesia
I came to my feet at the Wall Street station
and walked towards the door
like a reluctant witness to the witness stand . . .

And Little Emmett Till came to me
A face that long ago cured
my schoolboy faith
in that lyric . . .
O beautiful for spacious skies

If the road to critical citizenship is through dreams, *the 51st (dream) state* proposes, dreams come from a “self-critical place” (Sundiata’s phrase) and are formed by critical practice.⁴²

“Race as a Resource of Hope”: Race, Culture, and Dream

In concluding this essay, I shall situate *the 51st (dream) state* in relation to other instances of the poetics of race, culture, family, and dream and, in doing so, suggest that we read *the 51st (dream) state* in the more finite context of writings by a number of black intellectuals and other intellectuals of color, including Robin Kelley, Lani Guinier, Cornel West, Saidiya Hartman, and—not least—Barack Obama. They, too, try out, or try on, arguments for memory, alliance, and hope. The pronounced expressiveness of their writings (in some passages, at least) is bound up with aesthetic sensations specifically associated with the politics of intersection and implication.

The short list of works that form part of this conversation includes Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father* (1995), Robin Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams* and Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres’s *The Miner’s Canary* (both in 2002), Cornel West’s *Democracy Matters* (2004), and Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* (2007). In these works, imagination is a metaphor for political possibility and impossibility, a swinging door between agency and loss. It surfaces when these authors shift into an aesthetic register, as imaginative episodes mark shifts in vocation and mood. All these writers introduce the question of hope through the language of magic, tragedy, dream. Their texts suggest that, without the resources of the expressive, the aesthetic, or, indeed, the literary, advocating for hope out loud and in public is scarcely possible.

Some narratives constructed by black intellectuals, then, are preoccupied with the ambivalent condition of hope as a cultural correlative of anti-racist politics. We see this in the writings of Cornel West (“I’m a prisoner of hope,” a phrase later compacted into the term “tragicomic hope”) and in those of Lani Guinier (who understands “race as a resource of hope and racism as an enduring curse”).⁴³ If race is a signifier of hope, then the scene of signifying with others, the public performance of surmise, is what connects being “implicated” in racism to the condition of hopefulness. In *the 51st (dream) state*, the vocalists (all women) take charge of the music that moves toward this historically informed affective possibility. They specify the particulars of citizen imaginings to Sinatra’s refrain from “The House I Live In”: “That’s America to me.” And at the end they get the last word, a song structured around “what if” questions and statements beginning with “suppose.” “America, the Beautiful” resurfaces only to be gently sidelined in favor of its sequel, a “beautiful question” marking the mortal threshold of hope:

What if we are Life / or Liberty
and the Pursuit of something new?

And suppose the beautiful answer
asks the more beautiful question,

Why don't we get our hopes up too high?
Why don't we get our hopes up too high?
High!

The word *imagination* is a key signifier for Guinier and Gerald Torres, as it is for Sundiata, but its meaning in these two texts is not identical. Their theory of political race—"a ridiculously optimistic exercise of our imagination"—requires a magical realism informed by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Augusto Boal. Guinier and Torres yoke political optimism to a surreal aesthetic, an "emancipating faith in the unseen and the unknown." And that aesthetic supports the rituals of engagement, the formation of zones of purposeful enchantment where "individuals . . . share their stories and construct relationships that reinforce a more systemic and critical social understanding."⁴⁴ While Guinier and Torres may be in conversation with Sundiata, however, theirs is a different way of thinking through the relationship between the aesthetic and the political. They do not, for example, foreground the transformations of language performed by the inward- and outward-looking citizen of Sundiata's projects.

The literary enters these writings in the form of a politically necessary moment or episode, a conversion to hope by way of the nocturnal, magical, or radiant. Robin Kelley reads the repetitive, accusatory analysis of power as the dead end of professional academic habits of critique. He accepts the fact that "we [on the left] don't know what to build, only what to knock down," but believes that there are alternative discourses, including—significantly—those revealed by women within the family: "I inherited my mother's belief that the map to a new world is in the imagination . . . rather than in the desolation that surrounds us."⁴⁵ The everyday labors of democracy are inseparable from altered states of consciousness illuminated by the conjured past and the sense of being haunted—again, familial emotions. "It was as if I had conjured her up," Saidiya Hartman says of the archival phantasm of an ancestor."⁴⁶

Barack Obama's breakthrough moments, in *Dreams from My Father*, likewise turn on poetic and aesthetic experiences he describes as "haunted,"

“luminous,” and liminal. Obama discovered the public power of memory through the “sacred stories” of the Chicagoans he met as a political organizer. He characterizes them as tellers of “stories full of terror and wonder, studded with events that still haunted or inspired them.” Their narratives were full of “poetry,” allegorized as “a luminous world always present beneath the surface.” The eloquence of citizens, saturated with memory, led him toward hope. And hope materialized in church, through ekphrasis and allusion. Barack Obama heard third-hand about George Watt’s late Victorian allegorical painting of Hope as a blindfolded woman. This happened during the sermon by Jeremiah Wright that yielded the signature phrase “audacity of hope.”⁴⁷

Temporal slippage is central to these texts, especially the phenomenon that Saidiya Hartman, in her book on a yearlong pursuit of the presence and absence of slavery in Ghana, calls “tumbling the barricade between *then* and *now*.”⁴⁸ Like Nikhil Singh in his rereading of Du Bois, Hartman is looking back in order tentatively to look ahead to a way of “thinking and feeling beyond” what it currently means to be a cultural critic of the nation-state.⁴⁹ Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* is a report on her quest for traces of the history of transatlantic slavery. Her book is a public narrative in the form of a detective story or perhaps a ghost story. “To what end,” Hartman asks, “does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?” Living in “the future created” by slavery induces the “ongoing crisis of citizenship” out of which she writes: “To believe, as I do, that the enslaved are our contemporaries is . . . to acknowledge that they accompany our every effort . . . to imagine a free territory, a new commons. . . . It is a glimpse of possibility, an opening, a solicitation without any guarantee of duration before it flickers and then is extinguished.”⁵⁰ The civic imagination does many things in these works. It is an element of social movements. It is a metaphor for political possibility and impossibility. It is a rhetoric of persuasion. It is a trope for surmise, reflection, and sympathy. Likewise the word *public* changes from object to experience, raising questions about whether *public* is a location, a value, a story line, a politics, a keyword, an identity, or (I would argue) all of the above.

What we see in these writings and performances is not the aestheticization of blackness, though the association of blackness with specific expressive styles—with otherness, exoticism, disinhibition, or cool—is an inescapable part of their cultural context. Rather, what we discern are two implied or explicit claims. The first claim is that the works of black intellectuals in the U.S. provide a model of “implication”—of resistance, negotiation,

historical study, hope, and rhetorical extravagance—that speaks to the political and cultural conditions of the last decade. These texts show that hope is not politically naive, conceptually weak, or historically unmoored.

The second claim that undergirds these writings is that artistic creativity, or something very like it, is fundamental to the individual's capacity to entertain political hope. This is why revisiting the resources of the idea of the lyric matters. Sundiata and other creators of public cultural projects claim that imagination is a necessary part of democratic engagement. We can enter into the social labors of a multiracial, antiracist political culture *only* by passing through an aesthetically rich, memory-plagued, powerfully figurative and ultimately hopeful encounter with our own histories and the history of America. The moment of lyric citizenship may turn out to have been a phenomenon of a decade or two and one that involved a relatively modest number of artists, scholars, educators, political figures, cultural organizers, and active citizens. In the stricken economy of the postelection environment, the future of the interlocking discourses of race, hope, imagination, and democracy remains unclear. But it is far too soon to dismiss the staying power of artful counterpublics.

Notes

I am indebted to Maurine Knighton and Ann Rosenthal for providing access to Sekou Sundiata's unpublished work in many forms and to David Scobey for his generous comments on this essay.

1. Hosted by the August Wilson African American Cultural Center of Greater Pittsburgh and supported by the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, this was a breakaway meeting from a larger national convention for "fifty regional and national leaders in the arts who have a history of applying successful diversity efforts." As George Sanchez has argued, there is ample reason to challenge the reductive effects of managed and marketed diversity, and Sundiata's response to this challenge was to articulate a theory and practice of engaged intercultural performance. See George Sanchez, "Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy," *Foreseeable Futures* no. 4 (Imagining America, Syracuse, New York): 17.

2. Sundiata's The America Project was in conversation with recent meditations of the progressive tradition of Addams and Dewey; with a nondoc-trinaire, loosely "counter-hegemonic" arts and culture network resonating with the "cultural front" of the thirties as framed by Michael Denning in *The*

Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century (New York: Verso, 1998).

3. Sekou Sundiata, "Thinking Out Loud: Democracy, Imagination, and Peeps of Color," in *Diversity Revisited/A Reflection: A Summary of Diversity Revisited/A Conversation on Diversity in the Arts*, Report on Diversity Revisited Conference, June 8–9, 2004 (Pittsburgh: African American Cultural Center of Greater Pittsburgh, 2004), 8–9.

4. The principles and strategies of community-engaged theater are manifest in the mission of MAPP International, which produced *The America Project* and *the 51st (dream) state*. This approach to a wide range of performance practices is also embodied in the work of, for example, Rennie Harris Puremovement, Detroit's Matrix Theater Company, Cornerstone Theater in Los Angeles, Appalshop, the August Wilson Center for African American Culture, and many other sites.

5. Examples include the Center for Diversity and Democracy at the University of Southern California, the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, the Center for the Humanities and the Public Sphere at the University of Florida, the Institute on Culture, Ethnicity and the Modern Experience at Rutgers-Newark, the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships at Bates College, the Arts of Citizenship Program at the University of Michigan, and the Cultures and Communities Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

6. David Scobey, "Across: The Heterogeneity of Civic Education," in Michael B. Smith, Rebecca S. Nowacek, and Jeffrey L. Bernstein, eds., *Citizenship Across the Curriculum* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

7. Suzanne Lacey, "Introduction," in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay, 1994), 19–46.

8. Gladstone Hutchinson, "The Art of Dialogue on Difficult Issues: Critical Patriotism as a Theme for New Student Orientation," unpublished paper presented at the National Conference on Students in Transition, November 6–8, 2005, Costa Mesa, California.

9. Amiri Baraka, "Baraka Eulogizes Sundiata," at the memorial service held at the New School University, New York, August 22, 2007. http://www.seeingblack.com/article_254.shtml (accessed September 25, 2009). Baraka recalled meeting the young poet at an important transnational event in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania at the Sixth Pan African Congress in 1974. Sundiata was in his mid twenties, "finding his way through the maze of Pan African political unity, struggle & polemic."

10. Roberta Uno and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, eds., *The Color of Theater* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 5–6. This book, rooted in the practice of the New WORLD Theater at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (at this

writing closed due to university budget cuts), reflects the critical framework of *the 51st (dream) state*, then in its earliest phase of development.

11. Roberta Uno, "Introduction: The Color of Theater," in Uno and Burns, *The Color of Theater*, 7.

12. Talvin Wilks, "Elijah's Journey: Introduction to *Elijah*," in Uno and Burns, *The Color of Theater*, 386. Sekou Sundiata, "Afterword on *Udu*, formerly *Elijah*," *ibid.*, 421–23.

13. Joni L. Jones, "Conversations with History: Sekou Sundiata, Craig Harris, and *Elijah*," in Uno and Burns, *The Color of Theater*, 409–19. Jones draws usefully on Eleanor Traylor, "Two Afro-American Contributions to Dramatic Form," in Errol Hill, ed., *The Theater of Black Americans* (New York: Applause, 1987), 53, and on Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Random House, 1999), 164.

14. Samuel Cotton, *The Silent Terror: A Journey Into Contemporary African Slavery* (New York: Writers and Readers, 1999).

15. Sundiata, "Afterword on *Udu*," 422.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *The Crisis*, special issue on *Black Patriotism* 108, no. 6 (November/December 2001). http://www.thecrisismagazine.com/issues/2001/01_11-12.htm (accessed September 25, 2009). See also Hutchinson, "The Art of Dialogue."

18. Carol Bebel, "The Vision Has Its Time: Culture and Civic Engagement in Postdisaster New Orleans" in Amy Koritz and George Sanchez, eds., *Civic Engagement in the Wake of Katrina* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 89–90.

19. Sekou Sundiata, "Disintegrating General Public: Waking Up in the 51st (dream) state," address, Bucknell College 2007 America Project Kickoff Program, February 4–8, 2007, 79–80.

20. *Finding the 51st Dream State* (DVD documentary), 2009. Stanley Nelson, Firelight Media, director; Ann Rosenthal, MAPP International Productions, producer and publisher Packaged with excerpts from the script, The America Project course curriculum, and a DVD video of the full performance of *the 51st (dream) state*, recorded live at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November 2006.

21. The residencies yielded all four of the participant interview segments projected onto the multisectioned video screen at the rear of the stage during the performance. Two interviews highlight key organizers of Sundiata's Michigan residency. Ismael Ahmed was then executive director of ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services). Ahmed's interview is paired with that of Anan Ameri, director of the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. A second set of interviews was shot in Amherst at the New World Theater. Kiku Uno talks about the family's internment during

World War II, and Uday Joshi speaks of being mistaken for an Arab on the subway traveling from one university campus to another after 9/11.

22. Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 3–4.

23. John Stuart Mill, “Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,” in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–1991), 1:348–49.

24. Sekou Sundiata, community conversation, March 2007 (archival DVD), The America Project 2006–2007 residency, Austin, Texas. Produced by Evan Carton, director, Humanities Institute, University of Texas. A community dialogue participant in Austin pointed to the “theology of organizing” that was her version of democratic “implication”: “I was raised in a religious home, and if you do not participate, you’re not part of the world . . . watching . . . doesn’t help anybody, it doesn’t help you, you’re missing out [on] the sense of community . . . that’s what I feel citizenship is, it’s action, it’s awareness . . . to be able to really connect . . . I was able to do that after your performance. It just kind of came together for me. It was very moving. I can’t tell you.” See also Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), on “a theology of organizing” (chapter 2, *passim*), and specifically on “the ‘soft arts’ of relational organizing,” 68.

25. Sundiata, community conversation. Sundiata continued: “by the time Cornel West says the whole nation has become niggerized, there’s something very potent about that. So people responded to that . . . piece, ‘Nigga please.’ No matter what you do with that word it is so historically charged . . . that it may have all these other resonances . . . but it never loses that specificity which to me is a great place to enter a conversation.”

26. The multi-arts character of Sundiata’s work is explicit in the name of the producer of *Blessing the Boats, the 51st (dream) state*, and *Finding the 51st dream state*, formerly MultiArts Projects and Productions (MAPP), now MAPP International Productions, New York, New York.

27. Grice still didn’t think that she had told a true “citizenship story”—one like Sundiata’s, with “America” in the middle. Then she found one in the act of writing: “suddenly . . . the action of memory continues into the writing process”: “It was second grade and Mrs. Maxwell, a stern, unsmiling black woman . . . had us stand and make a circle in the middle of the room. For what now feels like the entire school day she drilled us on the lyrics to the national anthem.” Grice understands this moment as part of the ambivalent, lyrical pedagogy of national implication: “Her goal was not just to teach us the words, but . . . to teach us to be citizens. And it would no doubt take a book or two to

sort out the mental gymnastics it took for black people like her . . . to get to that place.” “Citizen Robin,” unpublished paper (2005).

28. Obama-Biden Campaign, Camp Obama Colorado Participant Guidelines 2008. *Self* is printed in quotes (Telling Your Story of “Self”) in the original document. Thanks to Harry Boyte, codirector of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Augsburg College, and codirector of the Civic Engagement subcommittee of Urban Policy Committee of the Obama-Biden Campaign, for providing a copy. The guidelines, principally authored by Marshall Ganz, include a literary template: “A *plot* begins with an unexpected *challenge* that confronts a *character* with an urgent need to pay attention, to make a *choice* for which s/he is unprepared. The choice yields an outcome—and the *outcome* teaches a *moral*. Because we can empathetically identify with the *character*, we can ‘feel’ the *moral*” (13–19). See also Marshall Ganz, “Why Stories Matter: The Art and Craft of Social Change,” *Sojourners Magazine* (March 2009).

29. StoryCorps is an independent nonprofit best known for weekly broadcasts on National Public Radio’s Weekend Edition and for its touring Mobile-Booth recording studio: <http://www.storycorps.org/> (accessed September 25, 2009). For examples of Photovoice methodology, see Caroline C. Wang, Susan Morrel-Samuels, Peter M. Hutchison, Lee Bell, and Robert M. Pestronk, “Field Action Report: Flint Photovoice: Community Building Among Youths, Adults, and Policymakers,” *American Journal of Public Health* 94, no. 6 (June 2004): 911–13. For an example of the participatory coauthorship of plays that is characteristic of many community-based theaters, see Roadside Theater’s “Community Residency Methodology,” <http://www.roadside.org/methodology.html>. (accessed September 25, 2009.) For a definitive recent investigation of “life writing,” see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

30. Sundiata, community conversation.

31. Sekou Sundiata, *the 51st (dream) state*, unpublished script quoted with permission of Maurine Knighton.

32. Sundiata, *Finding the 51st Dream State*.

33. Such rhetoric, however, was reperformed by Sundiata as a voice that the culture can’t shake. Sundiata’s signature riff, repeated with variations in several works over many years, was the delusional and spooky outpouring of the character “Space,” a street corner apparition from the days of Black Power in New York City.

34. Sekou Sundiata, National Public Radio Fresh Air, from WHYY, “Performance Poet Sekou Sundiata,” March 25, 2005. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4561097> (accessed September 29, 2009).

35. Sundiata, community conversation.

36. Sundiata, *the 51st (dream) state*.
37. Walt Whitman, "The Sleepers," <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1871/poems/102> (accessed October 9, 2009). Hart Crane, *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber (New York: Liveright, 1966), 108–12.
38. June Jordan, "He's Our Shakespeare: So Why Is America Ambivalent About Whitman?" Poetry Media Service: A Service of Poetry Foundation. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/programs/media.syndicate.html?id=6> (accessed April 2, 2011). Excerpted from "For the Sake of People's Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us," in *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays* (New York: Basic/Civitas Books, 2002), 242–56.
39. Barbara Palmer, Stanford Report, http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/2006/may_3/sekou-050306.html (accessed March 2, 2011).
40. Quoted in Julie Ellison, *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 156.
41. W. E. B. Du Bois, "My Country 'Tis of Thee," in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Creative Writings*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (White Plains, NY: Kraus-Thomson, 1985). From Dubois's headnote: "Arise, gracefully remove your hat, and tilt your head. Then sing as follows, powerfully and with deep uncton. They'll hardly note the little changes and their feelings and your conscience will thus be saved."
42. "This is what I came to find out is what I loved about America—the democratic tradition: the abolitionists, the labor movement, the women's movement, the suffrage movement," which yielded "a body of ideas and knowledge and music and culture that comes out of that self-critical place." *Finding the 51st dream state*. *The 51st (dream) state* works against the amnesiac epistemological habits of "infantile citizenship" as construed by Lauren Berlant in "The Theory of Infantile Citizenship," *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 408–9.
43. Cornel West, Commencement address at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, May 30, 1993. http://www.humanity.org/voices/commencements/speeches/index.php?page=west_at_wesleyan (accessed September 25, 2009). Nikhil Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
44. Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 20.
45. Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (New York: Beacon, 2003), 2.
46. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 16.