

“Unity in Identity”

With Walt Whitman’s “O Me! O Life!” as our stepping stone, we proceed here to question into the nature of identity and how it has come to manifest itself in public imagination. While the vehemence and seriousness with which identity politics has taken a hold of our cultural imagination surely merits direct, contextualized confrontation, what concerns us here is the underlying principle of identity that it assumes and proceeds according to. If identity indeed be an indispensable category of human life, and if it retain the power to coalesce unity and organic interconnectivity, then we must be magnanimous and irreverent enough to make greater demands upon it—demands that our time requires. Does our understanding of identity today really retain the possibility for genuine unity, or is our strife and divisiveness a product of its structural limitations? To what field might we turn in answering this question?

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill’d with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew’d,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.
—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*¹

In surveying the myriad of identities in existence within the public sphere, it can be difficult to tell whether their proliferation is evidence of overflowing vitality or eutrophic stagnation. While it has, for example, become common currency to talk of one’s ethnic and gender identities with particular seriousness, it seldom happens that we attempt to assess their life-affirming power or ask how they might contribute to the deepening of human life. This gesture is of paramount importance to the broader question of our collective spirit and character—for while it seems to be the case that identity constitutes an essential category in human life and a veritable wellspring from which much of its richness and sanity can be derived,

¹ Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. 1855.

it is far from axiomatic that the identities that emerge spontaneously and unreflectively are the best ones, or even that their dignity ought to exempt them from our evaluative, though ingenuous, questioning. Natural as this challenge might seem, we yet retain a cultural idiosyncrasy that takes the existence of certain identities as given, and that flees from any evaluative standpoint that asks about their merits.

The reason for this disposition might be the persistence of a democratic ethos, which could lead to the tacit conclusion that current navigations of personal and group identities are, at least in part, indications of a healthy body politic. As the motif of creative, agitative movement has left an indelible mark on our understanding of American democracy, it has become an expectation that the chaotic interplay of diverse elements is a necessary condition for its stability and progress, even if such an environment at times proves hostile and vehement. Echoing John Stuart Mill, Walt Whitman notes that “variety and freedom”, like the “perennial health-action of the air”, create that “ceaseless play of counterpart upon counterpart” which “brings constant restoration and vitality” to a people.² Alexis de Tocqueville describes American democracy as a vast aggregate of “restless activity” and “superabundant force”³; and Frederick Jackson Turner colors the American frontier spirit as a “restless, nervous energy” “withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom”.⁴ Far from being conceived as an order-loving, politically genteel society, America’s vitality as has been thought to depend on the free and boisterous interplay of diverse social, cultural, intellectual, and religious elements.

² Whitman, Walt. *Democratic Vistas: And Other Papers*. Toronto: W. J. Gage, 1888. Pg. 1.

³ Tocqueville, Alexis De. *Democracy in America*. Edited by J. P. Mayer. Translated by George Lawrence. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. Pg. 243-244.

⁴ Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Reading, American Historical Association, Chicago, July 12, 1893.

This acknowledgement of the creative and regulative potential of freedom and diversity has gone hand in hand with a belief in the “latent power and capacity of the people”⁵ to carve out their own destiny. So long as a space of free expression could be maintained alongside basic safeguards for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, we could trust that our diverse elements would come to express themselves in richer ways and incline their destinies towards greater unity and mutual respect. It was precisely this insight that undergirded Lincoln’s disarming question: “Why should there not be patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people?”⁶—and it is precisely this intuition that undergirds the now salient dictum “you do you”, which effectively upholds the locus of individual and group identity as both the safeguard for societal progress and the fundamental field of human dignity. For these reasons, questioning the merits of identities has become both morally questionable and practically dubious: they simply are not up for grabs.

Yet while there seems to be some wisdom in the democratic appreciation of diversity, its love of freedom, and the evaluative, *laissez faire* conservatism that both might inculcate, there also looms the possibility that the ground we are tilling can not promise the nutriment that American restlessness has been able to win for itself in the past. Even if the solution to the pitfalls of democracy is more democracy, it is still an open question whether or not the spirit of the people has appropriated for itself the vessels that can accommodate truly vital self-expression. In short, it is still an open question whether there is anything of a demos at all, or even a genuine possibility of *unity* in all of this discussion of identity.

⁵ Democratic Vistas, 20.

⁶ Lincoln, Abraham. "Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address." White House, Washington D.C. 4 Mar. 1861. Web.

The manner in which we have posed this question thus far leaves the essence of identity itself unaddressed and presupposed. *What is identity?* The first part of Whitman's Answer to the plight of nihilism reads: "*That you are here—that life exists and identity...*" Identity here is put on par with life itself, and is unified with it to form the singular fact of one's existence. If modern fascinations with the demarcation of identities merit consideration, and if we are to attain a standpoint from which their unificatory fertilities might be assessed, then its meaning and structure, on a plane of deeper and therefore wider significance, invite fresh attention.

Identity today is a means whereby people find unity in a shared sense of belonging, and avoid the dread of remaining obscure to themselves and to others. One translates oneself into a public element with the incantation "I identify as...", and with these words, expands the extent of one's reach into a wider social context. "As an X and a Y who has been through Z..." I stake a claim in the landscape of the social edifice. To identify with something is to both locate oneself within a territory of significance and to reflectively think oneself into these same contours. This being said, an identity is not necessarily a facade or a hasty expedient. It can constitute a person's deepest level of self-awareness.

Identity is thus a unity. As a unity, it draws forth from the disparate elements of the world contexts greater than oneself, and singularizes them. Once drawn forth, these elements take the horizon of life as their abode and become lived realities. What identity presupposes, however, is a space of unification: elements must appear *as inherently* tied together, and tied together in such a way that their appearances *as elements* come to the fore in unison with the coalescence of the field of their unified identity. Thus what we mean by the unity of an identity is both its active

aspect of drawing forth itself and its passive aspect of apprehending itself. Both the recognition of identity and the creation of identity require each other to become whole.

The question of just what would constitute such a field of unified identity has been a pressing one for much of the history of American thought. To take but a single yet quintessential instance, cosmopolitan thinkers from the early 20th century were concerned that the diversity of the United States would make it particularly difficult to create a productive harmony out its “cacophony” of different voices. As Horace Kallen wrote of ethnic identities, it “is the shock of confrontation with other ethnic groups and the feeling of alienity that generates in them an intenser self-consciousness, which then militates against Americanization”.⁷ He, along with Randolph Bourne, felt that America’s breadth threatened to stretch its connective tissue too thin. What was needed was a principle of identity that could unify these elements in a way that was not simply a reduction of their differences into a melting pot.

Their answer, which has since been taken up as one of the most compelling and salient social ideals, was cosmopolitanism, the goal of which is to nurture the full actualization of each individual group within a free pluralistic space. The inclusivity of such a space would turn identity from a negative protectiveness to a positive, productive commitment to the “loving care and development of” one’s “cultural values.”⁸ The principle coordinating such a transformation would be the realization that all “peoples in America are in a common enterprise” working toward the fuller expression of the “creative forces of civilization”.⁹ One’s more localized identity could thus become coordinated in a wider identification with the destiny of human

⁷ Kallen, Horace M. "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot: A Study of American Nationality." *The Nation*, February 25, 1915.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bourne, Randolph. "Trans-National America". 1916. In Hollinger, David A., and Charles Capper, eds. *The American Intellectual Tradition: A Sourcebook*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997. Pg. 154, 158.

becoming. Crystallizing the cosmopolitan ethos, Randolph Bourne insists that it “is not what we are now that concerns us, but what this plastic next generation may become in the light of a new cosmopolitan ideal.”¹⁰

Has cosmopolitanism yet become a living, palpable unity in identity? Hardly so. The issue is not so much a lack of motivation on the part of generations since—for the cosmopolitan ideal still speaks with veritable fire in many hearts and minds)—as it is a subtlety in the conception of identity undergirding it. While there is a clear attempt in cosmopolitanism to unify disparate and even antagonistic elements on the basis of “a common enterprise”, it is less evident that an actual realization has occurred to accompany it.

Why is an element of realization relevant to the cosmopolitan vision? Well, to return to an earlier point: *the creation of unity depends upon the apprehension of identity*. But in order for elements to present themselves as identical in the first place they must, in announcing themselves as elements, bring this identity along with them. More precisely, the very being of these elements must proceed out of the bare fact of their identity. Identity is not a superimposed appendage or coordination that acts upon entities already in being, nor is the unity that it coalesces a coerced circumstance that is initiated from without. Rather, *it is the field that makes the persistence of individuals possible to begin with*. Identity speaks through the elements that it reveals by sustaining them from within, and does so according to an inner harmony. Unity in identity must come *from* the realization that our shared identity is in some sense *more essential* than we ourselves are as separate beings. Without the recognition of this deeper essentiality, the sinews of

¹⁰ Bourne, 154.

authentic connectivity will fail to grow, and the hope of organic unity will continue to be dismissed as a fabricated idealism.

If this articulation of the cosmopolitan ideal is viable, then what it misunderstands in the essence of unity in identity is precisely this order of priority. For the sake of unity it proposes an identity, and in making this proposal, it staves off the fear of the melting pot with an assurance that the verity of this identity will depend upon primacy being placed on each individual constituent. In other words, cosmopolitan identity is a coordination of the myriad of smaller identities—each of which could persist without the foundation of the former—in such a way that the lower multitudes retain the grounds of their being for themselves. Since the movement of “unification” occurs through the gift that each identity imparts *to* the whole by participating creatively within it, the wider cosmopolitan identity cannot emerge as a reality that is *more essential* than each individual. Instead of coming to the realization of a deeper, more original sense of being, the occasion of this revelation has been turned into a transaction that lacks the transformative fire and ontological potency of a true awakening from underfoot. Cosmopolitan identity thus becomes the field for little more than a heterarchical partnership or confederation, with each element resisting the conditioning that a genuinely transcendent identity would harness in tracing all of them in organic unity.¹¹

What this amounts to in practice is a conception of identity that is egoistic. In viewing wider identity as really a proposal which one may or may not enter in agreement with, it distorts identity into a possession and diminishes its ability to speak from underfoot. This conception

¹¹ This is not, of course, to say that such an ideal would not have its merits, or that it would not be a vast improvement upon the current state of affairs. Quite the contrary. Yet what we are here concerned with is not the social efficacy of certain identities, but rather the consequences of the inner structure of the most eminent. Only in rethinking such a structure anew can we begin to push the possibilities of identity to its outer limits.

inevitably makes issues of identity appropriation, marginalization, nullification, or diminution emerge with notable force and vehemence. Identity becomes a matter of life and death, not in the sense of a question mark requiring earnest rumination and mediation, but rather in the sense of a resource battled over in the trenches of identity politics. The irony here is that in what would seem to be a situation in which we dominate our identities by freely dishing them out to the situations that call for them—(be they short-sighted social gains or more heroic cosmopolitan aspirations)—we are in fact caught by *them* in a dangerous solipsism. The reification of identity as a possession casts us in the shadow of a self-possessiveness, and nullifies what a true revelation of identity unveils—the illumination of a shared field of being that has always been present underfoot.

The issues that attend “egoistic” identity have to do not so much with particular identities *per se* as they do the unificatory limits of “identities-as-posessions.” On the one hand, we have a stultifyingly limited conception that, in virtue of its self-centered orientation, can only really satisfy the needs of individual *differentiation*, and that can do little to release us into the free space of truly authentic *unification* with others. On the other hand, we have a cosmopolitan solution that, for all of its force and ethical resonance, tends to take this self-centered structure as given, and only elucidates the logical conclusions that follow from its basic premises. So long as we suppose that the deepest field of identity lies within the locus of the individual or social group, within which it might become reified in the form of a possession, cosmopolitanism, with its proposal of a free heterarchical space of pluralism and mutual recognition, and commitment to the creative potential of individual and group identities, is indeed the highest ideal that we could possibly aspire to—the consummate ideal that the structure of egoistic identity has always

been pregnant with. What we must now consider is the possibility that the hope of unity in cosmopolitan identity is being undercut by its own premises, and whether or not the possibility of truly authentic unity depends upon our willingness to allow identity to announce itself anew—in short, whether there might not be a deeper field wherein the nature of identity could be rethought beyond the confines of the self-centered mode. Such a field we will now draw forth from heights of poetic insight yet enunciated: the space where disclosures of the future extend their agapic whispers across time, and beckon us towards our own latent possibilities.

Literature truly sane and “recuperative” turns the abyss of nihilism into the expanse of a boundless identity. It turns the eyes to the sun-orb behind, whence the soul, “not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them,”¹² extends its agapic rays through the valleys of all creation. This light whispers the saga of the powerful play and invites the circle of the eye to see itself reflected in its more original trans-historicity. It is here, in “the abstraction of all *time* from their verses”¹³, in the spontaneous enunciation of truths yet foretold, that “long-vista’d principles” beckon the arrival of our “copious, sane, gigantic offspring”—wherein there ever resides “her justification and success...almost entirely on the future...though dimly yet”¹⁴—that hope of “greater, broader, and fuller life”¹⁵, of “public and illustrious thoughts”¹⁶ crisp like mountain air, brave, free, and boundless. Here we see humankind born for the first time, amidst “the universes of the material kosmos,” “born through them, to prove them, concentrate them, to turn upon them with wonder and love—to command

¹² Emerson, R. W. “Self-Reliance.” 1841.

¹³ Emerson, R. W. “The American Scholar.” Address, before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, Cambridge, August 31, 1837.

¹⁴ Democratic Vistas, 2.

¹⁵ Burghardt, Du Bois William Edward. “Last message to the world”, 1957.

¹⁶ “The American Scholar.”

them, adorn them, and carry them upward into superior realms”¹⁷, to realms “above the veil”,¹⁸ horizons within which the outlines of “a little or larger band” of the knightlier creed emerge, “members separated, it may be, by different dates and States...a year, a century here, and other centuries there—but always one, compact in soul, conscience-conserving, God-inculcating...from age to age transmitted”.¹⁹

Whence comes the power in these words? From what far off wind does it breathe the “breath recuperative of sane and heroic life”?²⁰ What hidden revelation here contains the healing power that can transcend even the darkest of nihilisms—of recurring faithlessness, foolishness, and interminable existences? From out of the deepest of egoistic despair—“What good amid these, O *me*, O *life*?”—comes neither the disintegration of identity, nor its construction into a possession. Rather, the light of identity emerges underfoot in the fact *that* “*the powerful play goes on*”, and *yet*, “*you may contribute a verse*.” That time might attain the character of a powerful play, of a destiny charged with the verses of all aspiration hitherto, is a testament to the deepening of an interiority that has been released from the confines of the isolated ego-self. It is a testament to a deeper self-consciousness that has come to recognize itself *as* time. With the reverberations of history resounding in the immanence of the present, the abyss of time attains its conversion from the void of nihilistic interminability to the boundlessness of kosmic freedom.²¹

¹⁷ Democratic Vistas, 82.

¹⁸ Burghardt, Du Bois William Edward. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Publications, 1994. “Of the Training of Black Me.” Paragraph 29.

¹⁹ Democratic Vistas, 79.

²⁰ Ibid, 15.

²¹ This movement is anticipated by Nishitani in his account of the conversion from Nietzsche’s Eternal Recurrence to the field of *sunyata*. See Nishitani, Keiji. *Religion and Nothingness*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. Pg. 211-212, 229-237, 250-255.

While “the thought of identity” must belong to each for one’s own, “yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me”²², it emerges in an essential, ecstatically effervescent unity with the stream of time itself: a gift which no one is the sole author of, but which each might have the honor of beholding and imparting. It is the consummation of the gift of life, existence and identity, all tied into One, in the form of a grateful re-gifting to all time—*the consummation of identity* in “the idea of the infinite”²³:

There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, likes the stars, shining eternal...Under the luminousness of real vision, it alone takes possession, takes value...it expands over the whole earth, and spreads to the roof of heaven.²⁴

It is the farthest thing from “mere” aesthetics that moves the soul to such heights as these, the farthest thing from a meretricious veneer which occludes the diligence of the more critical, “clear-headed” faculties. In words replete with “the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which larger perception only can inspire”, we become happy “as great power makes us happy”²⁵, and feel the expansion of a wider, deeper identity, prior to the vessels of politics, ethnicities, nationalities, and sexualities, though immanent in them—a unity made manifest in the originality of an identity at once prior to and ahead of us, and from which all derivations receive their lifeblood. It is to here, in this gathering across time, in the facticity of Destiny, that the vibrations of power and joy beckon us: to the field of Spirit, wherein all identity receives its redemption and all existence, tied up into One, draws forth the nutriments of its growth.

Only with an eye to this field, far off and directly underfoot, should we lend our appraisal of the myriad of identities now in motion.

²² Democratic Vistas, 41.

²³ Ibid, 53.

²⁴ Ibid, 41.

²⁵ R. W. Emerson to Walt Whitman. July 21, 1855. Concord, Massachusetts.