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A NATION STILL BECOMING: CONSCIOUS PLURALISM AND THE CRISIS OF BELONGING

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Abstract

"A Nation Still Becoming: Conscious Pluralism and the Crisis of Belonging" contends that the United States, often mythologized as a completed democratic project, remains in a fragile and unresolved process of becoming, ethical, political, and human. At the center of this inquiry lies a deceptively simple question: What does it mean to be human in a nation still learning how to be humane? Drawing from Indigenous epistemologies, Black radical thought, decolonial theory, and aesthetic philosophy, the work argues that American democracy has long relied on exclusionary logics, masking dispossession and racial hierarchy beneath the language of inclusion and pluralism.

This article proposes "conscious pluralism" as both a political ethic and institutional design, one that does not seek resolution through sameness but demands sustained relation across irreducible difference. It critiques the historical metaphors of pluralism, such as the symphony and melting pot, for concealing hierarchy and assimilationist pressures. Instead, it offers an agonistic model of democracy that embraces contestation as constitutive rather than corrosive. Through an interdisciplinary lens, the paper reinterprets civic practices, national symbols, and testimonial expressions by artists and thinkers such as Baldwin, Harjo, Morrison, and Glissant, arguing for a democracy rooted not in consensus but in relation, opacity, and shared ethical responsibility.

Foregrounding cultural persistence and testimonial sovereignty, the article insists that pluralism is not a diversity of static identities, but an evolving practice of coauthorship. The work concludes by challenging institutions to reimagine education, public space, immigration policy, and civic memory not as tools of assimilation, but as infrastructures for ethical encounter. In a nation fractured by historical amnesia and ongoing violence, conscious pluralism offers a way to inhabit the tensions of belonging without demanding erasure. Democracy, in this frame, is not a product but a practice: unfinished, relational, and deeply human..

Keywords

Conscious Pluralism, Democratic Becoming, Testimonial Sovereignty, Agonistic Democracy, Cultural Persistence, Hyphenated Identity, Settler Colonialism, Poetics of Relation, Epistemic Resistance, Relational Belonging

I. The Question of Becoming

What does it mean to be human in a nation still learning how to be humane?

This is not a rhetorical question. It is the marrow of our political, philosophical, and cultural crisis, living in the spaces between us, in the pause before a child answers when asked about their family's homeland, in the moment of recognition when strangers discover shared stories across different languages. It breathes in the gap between who we are told we should be and who we know ourselves to be.

But even this question must be situated on unsettled ground. To ask what it means to be human in America is to ask it from land that was never empty, land layered with Indigenous histories and sovereignties that persist despite centuries of erasure. Before pluralism can be celebrated as democratic virtue, it must be reckoned with as settler-colonial imposition. The United States did not begin as a nation of immigrants; it began as a project of dispossession.

Indigenous epistemologies offer a radically different foundation for political life. The Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace, for example, prefigured participatory governance not as a mechanism for managing dissent,

but as a commitment to the care of relation across generations[1]. The Potawatomi notion of bodewadmi, "to keep fire," names governance not as authority but as stewardship[2]. These are not lost traditions; they are living, breathing philosophies of relation that continue to challenge the nation's narrow definitions of democracy.

American democracy, for all its professed universality, has long operated on an exclusionary logic. The phrase "all men are created equal" rings hollow when its architects trafficked in slavery, genocide, and the erasure of entire ways of being. The "human" has always been a contested category in the American imaginary. And yet, it is precisely from this wound, this deeply human paradox, that the possibility of democracy emerges.

To persist as a culturally marginalized community is not to wait passively for inclusion, but to assert one's full humanity through presence, practice, and refusal. Cultural persistence becomes a mode of democratic authorship. These communities do not orbit the democratic project; they animate it, pressurize it, recompose it through the patient work of expanding what it means to belong to each other.

Democracy, then, must be understood as a verb. Not a static achievement but an always-unfinished process of relation. This is what conscious pluralism demands: not merely the recognition of difference, but a commitment to encounter, to agonism, to the slow and often painful work of belonging together without becoming the same.

II. Genealogies of American Pluralism

The metaphor of the cultural symphony, once invoked by Horace Kallen[3] to affirm America's pluralistic aspirations, always concealed hierarchy. Someone conducts. Someone composes. Some instruments are deemed essential; others ornamental. His beautiful vision of America as a symphony where each community's voice remained distinct yet harmonious gradually transformed under historical pressure.

And then came the melting pot, a euphemism for erasure masquerading as unity. It offered no harmony, only chemical assimilation: to belong, one had to dissolve. The alchemy of cultural fusion became the chemistry of dissolution.

The Cold War sharpened these stakes. Difference became suspect. The immigrant, the dissenter, the racially marked body, all potential threats to the national security imaginary. Even Dewey, once the patron saint of progressive democracy, was absorbed into this logic when his vision of pluralism failed to reckon with structural white supremacy[4]. Even ideals can be weaponized.

The ghost of this betrayal lingers. It haunts our classrooms, courtrooms, and curricula. Symbols, especially the flag, became caught in this transformation, deployed in classrooms where children learned to silence their mothers' songs, planted on territories where other ways of life were uprooted, draped over ceremonies that sanctified rather than examined our national choices.

III. Democracy as Practice

Dewey taught us that democracy is not a distant ideal but an everyday ethic. It happens in the classroom, the neighborhood, the workplace. But Chantal Mouffe reminds us that democracy is not peace; it is conflict held in relation[5]. Her vision of agonistic pluralism insists that the political requires disagreement, not despite community but because of it.

Their dialogue is generative. Dewey offers the texture; Mouffe, the friction. Together they make room for an ethic of conscious pluralism, which demands proximity without assimilation, difference without indifference. Agonistic intimacy.

This kind of democracy does not ask "who belongs?" It asks: how do we remain in relation while preserving our irreducibility? It does not erase the other to affirm the self, but insists that only through the other's presence can the self be known at all. Democracy composed of culturally rooted communities brings more wisdom to public discourse, more approaches to collective challenges, more ways of understanding what justice might look like in practice.

IV. Testimonial Sovereignty

To carry culture within America is to inhabit a geography of the heart, a terrain layered with ancestral memory, historical rupture, and speculative possibility. It is not simply about where one comes from, but how one moves, remembers, resists, and remakes. The hyphen, "African-American," "Native-American," "Latino-American," et

[1] Berg, John. n.d. "Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee."
[2] "Culture | NHBP." n.d.
[3] Harvard University. "The Right to Be Different." n.d. The Pluralism Project. Harvard University
[4] Dewey, John. 1916. "Democracy and Education". Macmillan
[5] Mouffe, Chantal. 2000. The Democratic Paradox. Verso.

cetera, is not a grammatical afterthought but a cartographic strategy. These are not diluted identities; they are double exposures, sites of tension and creative endurance.

Philosopher-poet Édouard Glissant names this condition with precision: Relation[6]. Identity, he writes, is not a rooted essence but a rhizomatic entanglement, a becoming-with others across space, history, and language. In the American context, hyphenation has too often been read as compromise or fragmentation. But through Glissant, we see that this hyphen is a site of opacity, where multiple inheritances coexist without collapsing into one another. It is a refusal to be transparent to the gaze of the nation-state or the academy. As Glissant insists: "We demand the right to opacity.[7]"

Opacity is not about withdrawal, but about resisting capture. It affirms that one's cultural knowledge, trauma, and joy need not be translated to be respected. In this light, testimonial sovereignty is not only about self-expression, it is about refusing to be known on terms not chosen by the self. It is a form of epistemic resistance and poetic authorship.

This is not relativism. It is not a disavowal of common ground, but an assertion that common ground cannot be premised on the flattening of difference. It aligns with a deeper philosophical claim: that identity is not what we have, but what we do in relation. The self is not a finished entity but a site of aesthetic-political negotiation. This resonates with a humanistic perspective that insists being human is not a static condition but an unfolding ethical responsibility, particularly in contexts of rupture, exile, and exclusion.

When James Baldwin declares, "I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores," he is not appealing for recognition, he is performing a re-mapping of American origin[8]. He asserts sovereignty not as a claim to property but as an authorship of meaning, a testimonial act that reorders national temporality. Black Americans are not latecomers to the American story; they are foundational authors of its most vital truths.

Joy Harjo, the Nation's first Native American Poet Laurette, extends this tradition not by assimilating to dominant forms but by bending English into a vessel for Indigenous thought[9]. Her poetry enacts Glissant's poetics of relation, it sings in multiple registers, resists simple legibility, and insists that the land itself speaks. She does not simply preserve culture; she transforms it, performing what Glissant calls a poetics of the earth, where identity and land, body and memory, language and cosmos exist in mutual vibration.

Toni Morrison's aesthetic, too, is a kind of testimonial opacity. Her characters carry ancestral pain not as pathology but as presence. In Beloved, memory is not linear; it moves in spirals, haunts the present, shapes the flesh[9]. Her refusal to "explain" Black life to white readers is not exclusion, it is ethical form. She writes not to translate but to affirm the interior lives of those America taught itself to forget. In this sense, Morrison's work is not simply literature; it is cosmological reparation, an effort to write the world otherwise.

To be hyphenated, then, is not to be split. It is to inhabit Relation. It is to refuse both assimilation and isolation, to be of multiple worlds and beholden to none. In a society that often demands simplification, hyphenated identity insists on complexity. It asks not to be resolved but to be listened to. It is not a bridge between worlds, it is a world unto itself.

In this light, testimonial sovereignty is not merely cultural pride. It is an epistemology. It is a way of knowing the self as part of a dense network of relations, historical, spiritual, ecological, that defy the logic of borders. And it calls for a democracy capacious enough to hold these forms of life without requiring them to perform their legibility.

V. National Symbols as Agonistic Texts

The American flag is not sacred. It is a contested text, a living document rather than a sacred relic.

David Hammons stains it with Pan-African colors, not to deface it, but to reframe it[10]. His African-American Flag doesn't reject American belonging but expands its visual vocabulary. Faith Ringgold quilts it, renders it tactile, domestic, vulnerable, wrapping the flag around narratives it was never designed to hold, making it carry the full weight of American experience[11].

Colin Kaepernick kneels. He does not turn away; he turns inward[12]. The gesture is a grammar of witness. Not defiance, but a different fidelity. He performs what James Baldwin once called "the lover's quarrel" with

[6] Glissant, Édouard. 1997. "Poetics of Relation". University of Michigan Press
[7] Baldwin, James. 1992. "The Fire Next Time". Vintage.
[8] Alexander, Kerri Lee. "Joy Harjo." National Women's History Museum. 2019
[9] Morrison, Toni. 1987. "Beloved". Alfred A. Knopf
[10] Hammons, David. African American Flag. 1990, New York
[11] Ringgold, Faith Ringgold. "Flag Story Quilt." n.d. Spencer Museum of Art.
[12] HISTORY.com Editors. 2025. "Quarterback Colin Kaepernick Sits During National Anthem | August 26, 2016 | HISTORY." HISTORY.

America, to love the country enough to demand its transformation. His quiet kneeling illuminated this complexity with remarkable grace, rejecting neither America nor its symbols but asking that they carry their full moral weight.

What if we approached the flag as growing text? What if its thirteen stripes could represent not just original colonies but the layers of experience that have shaped American reality? What if its field of stars could expand to hold the full constellation of communities that make up our national life?

VI. Protest as Practice

June 2025[13]. The streets erupt. Not in chaos, but in claim. Protest is not the failure of democracy; it is its pulse.

What started as resistance to deportation raids in Los Angeles evolved into broader questioning of a system that treats cultural and political expression by marginalized communities as inherently suspicious. The protesters were not rejecting America but demanding that America live up to its promises. Their presence in public space, their refusal to accept invisibility, their insistence on being heard, these acts require tremendous courage precisely because the cost of speaking truth in this country has always been unevenly distributed.

But protest is not merely individual resistance, it is a ritual of collective recognition. In the choreography of march and chant, people become visible to each other. The experience of injustice, which so often isolates, becomes shared. Each raised voice affirms that pain is not private misfortune but public condition. The crowd becomes more than a sum of grievances; it becomes a temporary commons of refusal, mourning, and imagination.

The state responds with tear gas; the literal manifestation of what conformity does to breath. When citizens gathering to voice grievances are met with armored military vehicles, when communities asserting their right to exist fully are treated as insurgencies, we witness the gap between our democratic ideals and our democratic practice.

And yet, through protest, new forms of solidarity are forged. People who might never share a neighborhood or language find themselves side by side, naming the same violences. These moments of collective action generate not just resistance, but relation. Protest becomes a social furnace: burning away the illusions of separation and forging a deeper sense of co-struggle.

The protests are not merely reactive. They are generative. They produce new imaginaries. Each sign, each chant, is a theory of belonging. Each footstep a demand: not just to be seen, but to be centered.

VII. Conscious Pluralism as Institutional Design

Policy must follow philosophy. The persistent American assumption that unity requires uniformity, that difference threatens stability, must be challenged through both imagination and implementation.

Education must prepare us not for consensus but for contact. Curricula should not canonize, but catalyze. Let students be unsettled. Let memory be contested. This requires moving beyond "colorblind" approaches that pretend difference doesn't matter toward "culture-conscious" policies that recognize how identity shapes lived experience.

We must move from the notion of curriculum as canon to curriculum as commons. This means structuring classrooms not around the mastery of standardized narratives, but around the shared negotiation of meaning across difference. Include not only literature from the Global South or historically excluded voices, but also pedagogical methods grounded in Indigenous storytelling, Afro-diasporic memory work, and immigrant oral traditions. Train educators not merely in content delivery but in cultural humility and dialogic facilitation. Rethink metrics of success to include the cultivation of relation, civic imagination, and ethical curiosity.

Immigration policy under conscious pluralism must abandon the assimilationist logic of "earning" belonging. Recognize multilingualism, cultural maintenance, and transnational ties not as problems but as civic assets. Create legal frameworks that protect not only individual entry but also cultural continuity, such as public funding for community cultural institutions, protections for transnational remittances and travel, and formal recognition of diasporic identities in census and civil documents.

Public commemorations should honor the full spectrum of American experience. Establish a federal commission for Living Memorials, structures that evolve, rather than endure unchanged. Let each region determine what and whom it chooses to honor, with rotating exhibits and community participatory design. Move beyond stone and bronze toward installations that invite interaction, learning, and revision.

Civic participation must be reimagined beyond voting. Include protest, artmaking, language preservation, and mutual aid as vital acts of democratic authorship. Design civic infrastructure, libraries, parks, public transport, not simply for utility, but as spaces of co-presence where pluralism is lived rather than legislated.

The goal is not harmony, but infrastructure for agonism, institutions capable of holding contradiction without collapsing into repression or retreat.

[13] BBC News. 2025. “Trump Sends Another 2,000 National Guards and 700 Marines to LA on Fourth Day of Unrest.”

VIII. Becoming Human, Becoming Democratic

To be American is not to arrive, but to become. The flag is not a symbol of completion but of composition. Democracy, if it is to be worthy of the name, must be capacious enough to hold its multiplicities without flattening them.

This is not a politics of inclusion. It is a politics of transformation. A refusal to be absorbed. A commitment to remain in tension. Conscious pluralism is the art of staying open to that which resists capture, the daily choice to remain complex in a world that prefers simplicity, to stay rooted while remaining open, to be fully oneself while contributing to something larger than oneself.

And perhaps this is what it means to be human in a democracy still becoming: to remain in relation without resolution, to dwell in difference without domination, to write a future where all our voices remain unfinished, unsilenced, and necessary.

The question with which we began, What does it mean to be human in a nation still learning how to be humane?, cannot be answered in theory alone. It must be inhabited. It must become personal.

So we turn the questions outward: Where do you locate your humanity in relation to others? Not just in identity, but in action, in refusal, in presence? What histories do you carry? What forms of silence have shaped you? What truths have you inherited, and which have you resisted? In what ways have you been asked to disappear, and in what ways have you asked that of others?

Democracy is not something we receive; it is something we practice. And practice begins with the willingness to be undone, by encounter, by story, by accountability. The work of conscious pluralism is not theirs to do, it is ours. It begins wherever you are: in the language you choose, in the symbols you question, in the relations you sustain.

What if belonging is not something we seek, but something we extend? What if being human is not a right to assert, but a responsibility to enact, over and over again?

The flag, reimagined, waves not over conquered territory but over a landscape still being written by voices that refuse to be silenced. In that refusal, patient, persistent, and ultimately loving, lies both the challenge and the promise of our shared American becoming.

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