

Federation National Meeting Remarks

Birmingham, Alabama

November 14, 2013

by Carole Watson, Acting Chair, National Endowment for the Humanities

Those words were so kind. Thank you, John. I also want to thank Esther Mackintosh, David Colburn, and the Federation board for your wise stewardship of this organization, especially during these difficult times. And thank you, too, to the Federation Planning Committee led by Committee Chair Ann Thompson, and Armand DeKeyser, Executive Director; Chairman John Rochester, and Dafina Ward of the Alabama Humanities Foundation for the wonderful work you've done in planning and hosting this year's national meeting whose theme is: "Lifting Us Up! Reflection, Reconciliation, Renewal."

What a theme for this time in our history, a time of significant Civil Rights Anniversaries! And in Birmingham! What a place for state humanities councils - the nation's most powerful network for humanities-based public discussion - to gather to consider this theme and its implications for the work of the councils today.

I know that I speak for all of us from the NEH in saying how glad we are to be a part of this meeting which, in some ways, feels historic. I can't call out the names, although I very much want to, of all of the NEH staff who are here (there are 12), but I do want to recognize Federal/State Partnership Director Edie Manza and her colleague, Senior Program Officer Kathleen Mitchell, who are right here and who - with your help - work every day to keep our Partnership with you vital. More about that later.

As for me personally, I have a powerful sense of returning. Not just because I've visited Birmingham before, but because this is the place where my great-great grandparents were born and made their lives until the latter 1880s and early 1890s. It's the place they were impelled to leave along with hundreds of others - family members, relatives, fellow church members - in a little known migration from Alabama (and Georgia) to the farms and coal mines of Southeastern Kansas where I grew up. My great-great grandmother was born here before Birmingham was even called Birmingham; her marriage license

was recorded in 1888 by the Shelby County Courthouse not too far from here. Family lore also has it that other ancestors - years earlier - had been slaves on farms near what is now the small town of Eutaw, Alabama in Greene County, less than 100 miles away. So that is one reason, and because I know that the city of Birmingham itself is also observing its Civil Rights anniversaries, that I am experiencing a strong - albeit complicated - feeling of homecoming here in Birmingham.

My sense of returning also has to do with being in the presence once again of so many committed state council members and staff. I've had a number of different positions at NEH in recent years, but I started at the agency, and grew up professionally there, working closely with state humanities councils - and during the councils' very early, formative years. We were once young together.

I am deeply proud to see that in pursuing their mission, individual state councils - and state councils collectively as a national network, in fact, a national movement linked together by the Federation - have succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams. And that the strong sense of purpose, the spirit that animated the councils from their inception, animates the state council network still. This conference and its theme may be the latest iteration, but the sense of purpose is nothing new.

Yet, together we have been facing very tough times. And, despite all your successes, for some time now, you (and we) have had to live with great uncertainty about our budgets. I want assure you that we at NEH understand how difficult this has been for state councils. We understand that not knowing what your annual allocation will be or when you will receive it plays havoc with your ability to plan. We also recognize that as bad as this situation has been in recent years, the uncertainty about what will happen with the Fiscal Year 2014 appropriation is an even *greater* worry. Moreover, all of this is taking place during a time when there are signs that - to some extent - the public consensus about the value of the humanities is being questioned and may - at times - appear to be unraveling. I won't tell you not to worry, but here are some thoughts:

The NEH and the state councils are a public good and together we're doing work that is essential to our democracy. As NEH approaches its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2015, the humanities are still vital to the country – budget deficits notwithstanding. In our fractured political culture, we need the humanities more than ever: to help us understand the choices we must make as citizens; to help us understand the history that has led us to this moment; and to work toward the civility that former Chairman Jim Leach and previous chairmen championed so ardently.

*“Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens.” “The humanities belong to all the people of the United States.”* These statements in NEH's founding legislation are as valid today as when they were written, just over 48 years ago.

The report of the Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, “The Heart of the Matter” was a timely affirmation that the humanities are at the core of our well-being as a society. So I believe it's important to remember that what we're doing is profoundly important. All praise then, that a number of state councils have been holding well-attended public forums to discuss “The Heart of the Matter” report, the most recent having taken place this past week in Georgia.

In a recently published interview, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, who last May helped launch NEH's Created Equal project at The Supreme Court, spoke about how study of the humanities makes one a better judge. He said: “Literature is crucial to any democracy.” In the interview, he also said that “by studying the humanities we can . . . understand how other people live. . . It's important to be able to imagine what other people's lives might be like, lives that your decisions will affect. . . people who are not only different from you, but also very different from each other.”

Other noteworthy individuals, many from outside our immediate world of the humanities, have made similarly strong statements of support.

And, we can remind ourselves that, in spite of current travails in which we are not alone, neither you nor we at NEH are falling apart. We at NEH are excited about our work and

our plans and I know from conversations with Esther Mackintosh and from Edie Manza - and from what I myself see going on - that you are too.

Isn't it also true that we have it in our power to be stronger, to be better able to weather the current storm if we resolve to gather in partnership? If we agree that we will allow nothing to weaken the connection, the bond, that state councils have forged with each other (greatly facilitated by the Federation) and the relationship that NEH and state councils together continue to nurture through the Federal/State Partnership?

In speaking of that partnership, it would be negligent not to mention Francis Sheldon Hackney who was born in Birmingham, Alabama on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1933, and died this past September 12<sup>th</sup>. Some in this room will remember him. Sheldon Hackney was a foremost historian of the American South and among his other achievements was NEH Chairman from August 1993 to August 1997. It was Sheldon Hackney who was responsible for instituting the Office of Federal-State Partnership, a structural change at the Endowment intended to make it possible to strengthen the ties between NEH and state humanities councils. Moreover, in his personal and public life, Sheldon Hackney was a lifelong and fierce advocate for all that the theme of this conference implies: "Lifting Us Up! Reflections, Reconciliation, Renewal." I would be remiss not to remember him at this meeting here in Birmingham today.

As we wait with great anticipation for President Obama's nomination of a new NEH Chairman, which could take place very, very soon, we have continued to move forward, including on the Congressional front, led by Courtney Chapin, NEH's Director of White House and Congressional Affairs. And, as always, we're grateful to the Federation and the state humanities councils (and to the National Humanities Alliance) for helping us with these efforts and for all they are doing on Capitol Hill.

We continue to move forward with NEH's Bridging Cultures initiative led by Assistant Chairman for Partnership and Strategic Initiatives, Eva Caldera. We're proud to have worked with you on two signature Bridging Cultures efforts: the Bridging Cultures

Bookshelf – titled Muslim Journeys – and the Created Equal project. Both of these efforts and all that state councils do are grounded in the ideals of NEH’s founding legislation, in essence, that the humanities become active components of our nation’s civic life. After all, our mandate from Congress charges the Endowment to: “support the study and the application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions and history and the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.” No one promised this would be easy. Working sessions at this conference are designed to help such highly charged public conversations take place in a productive manner.

In NEH programs observing the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War we see without surprise that that conflict continues to haunt the nation’s memory and that discussion can at times prompt heated disagreement over its meaning and results. These conversations are the stuff of the humanities, the essence of the programs that you and we are supporting.

In recent months, NEH, the National Park Service, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation joined together to link the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of landmark civil rights cases. The title of this project: From Civil War to Civil Rights. As to what’s next, we are actively considering and looking forward to consulting with you about ways to mark NEH’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. And, very soon, we will announce that NEH has a special interest in programs about the experience, history, and meaning of war and that we are especially interested in projects that serve veterans. We have funded such programs in the past but we are now planning to focus more effectively on veterans and what the humanities have to offer to conversations about war and national service in war.

As we pursue this special emphasis, how could we not but be inspired by the veterans’ projects supported by state councils? Programs so well-conceived and well-received in the communities where they have taken place. There are so many stellar examples that I dare not single out any one of them.

As we at NEH continue to work on the components of our special emphasis on veterans, the meaning of war, and of military service, we will do so with you as part of our ongoing conversation on Partnership.

Thank you for including me and my colleagues from the NEH as an integral part of this Federation National Meeting. In years to come, The Birmingham National Meeting will be one to remember. It has been my great pleasure to be here and to speak with you today. Thank you.