Foreword

The University Seminars at Seventy-Five: An Ongoing Experiment in Continuity with Novelty

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In the forty years that I have been at Columbia as a professor of biology, I have noticed that too often we value novelty above continuity. By novelty I mean the powerful impact of our faculty's ideas and works on the greater world, our capacity for innovation, and of course the historical accumulation of awards by our faculty. We celebrate these, and why not?

But that is not enough. After more than four decades as a professor here, and after almost a decade as director of the University Seminars, I have come to believe that we need, in addition, to give as much attention to the simple fact of our continuity and to celebrate the ways in which that continuity has been maintained.

In particular, we need to acknowledge those generous people who have, over the past couple of hundred years, given Columbia funds for our endowment—which now is among the highest in the country and the world—and who remain for the most part unknown unless a school or a building has their name on it. But all donors to our university's endowment should be thanked equally for their decision to give us their wealth while they can, so that Columbia will have the funds available to grapple with the problems of the future.

In this book we celebrate such a gift to our endowment. The University Seminars offer a particularly clear example of the difference an endowment can make even without a building. Ours has allowed us to have half a century of continuity, with novelty emerging at all times.

The University Seminars at seventy-five is an ongoing experiment in safe conversation among groups of people of all ages and backgrounds brought together by common interests but never by common conclusions. The Seminars are for that reason also an experiment in the politics of democracy. We cannot take for granted our freedom to disagree without punishment. It is increasingly rare on a global scale and has become more challenged even in our own country. So long as endowments are to be spent according to the wishes of their donors, creative conversations are what we will continue to celebrate.

Seventy-five years ago, as the terrible precedents in human cruelty and violence that were set by World War II were still emerging, acting University President Frank Fackenthal and Professor of Latin American History Frank Tannenbaum (Columbia College Class of 1921) founded the Seminars in response to the existential problems they saw emerging from a world at war. The University Seminars thus began as a presidential initiative. After the war ended they continued as a program that Professor Tannenbaum intended to one day become a school within the university—one that would concentrate its efforts, as the Seminars were designed to do, on existential problems that transcended the boundaries of Columbia's schools and departments.

In this the Seminars managed to maintain their unique bottom-up management style throughout the Cold War. But it was clear by the time of the rise of Fidel Castro that Tannenbaum was not going to be simply the dean of a new school. I saw this as a sophomore in the college from the window of my dorm room on the ninth floor of Hartley Hall in April 1959. As director of the University Seminars and also as chair of the Seminar on Latin America (515) that he had founded, Tannenbaum had invited Castro, Cuba's new president, to visit the campus during his first trip to our country.

This was well before the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the subsequent stand-down between our country and the Soviet Union, and Castro was quite a draw. The steps of Low Memorial Library were packed. One photo from the time captures a smiling Frank, a serious President Castro, and a rather unhappy University President Grayson Kirk surrounded by a dense crowd of students. You can guess by the expressions on their faces that Tannenbaum was not interested in currying favor with either of his colleagues on those steps.

For our twenty-fifth anniversary in 1968, the year before he died, Tannenbaum edited a volume of essays called *A Community of Scholars*, in which he made clear that the University Seminars were not about to become any sort of "Seminars University." Then, when she passed away in 1972,

his widow, Jane Belo, left Columbia a gift to endow the operation of the University Seminars in his memory. This gift lifted the Seminars into the unique situation of having the continuity of an endowment coupled with a high rate of emergent novelty through shared management. This was Tannenbaum's model for the program.

Since then the Seminars have had a full half-century of freedom from any impulse to become important at the expense of their freedom to decide their own futures. Instead we have had fifty years of novelty and creativity as new members, new Seminars, and new directors have learned how to make use of the unique creative freedom our endowment was designed to reward and protect. Since I have been around for so long, I am pleased to be able to share a memory of each of my four predecessors. Each of us in our own different manner has managed so far to preserve the Seminars' core value of nurturing novelty.

Frank Tannenbaum was the founder and first director of the University Seminars, serving from their inception in 1944 until his death in 1969. Though I never met him, I am sure if I had, we would have found a lot to talk about, as we had similar backgrounds. We both went to Columbia College soon after devastating wars—World War I in his case and World War II in mine—and we were both the first in our families to graduate from high school.

Professor of Philosophy James Gutmann (Columbia College Class of 1918) became the second director on Frank's death in 1969. I returned to Columbia in 1978, getting my PhD and carrying out the research that led Columbia's biological sciences department to offer me a professorship. My wife, Amy, my daughter, Marya, and I were given an apartment in a small Columbia building that also was home to Professor Gutmann. I did not know anything of the Seminars then, but I knew him to be a quiet, somewhat intimidating, always polite neighbor.

Professor of Economics Aaron Warner, protégé of Frank Tannenbaum and Isidor I. Rabi, was the third director of the Seminars, from 1976 to 2000. Professor Rabi, a Nobel laureate in physics and founder of the Radiation Laboratory, where I had my time as an undergraduate, inculcated in many people—including Professor Warner and me—a deep respect for the social obligation of scientists to do their best to ensure that our work was in the interests of society as a whole. Professor Warner had had a distinguished career working for President Roosevelt during the New Deal, and he brought to the Seminars a new commitment to social consciousness. To his credit, he did not bring his own opinions into the Seminars' choices

of topics. And so, under his direction even as distant a fellow as myself could come to him with a radical notion and find that it would be acceptable as a new University Seminar.

So it was that, in 1996, I proposed a University Seminar I called *The Two Cultures Revisited: Current Representations of Human Diversity* (Seminar #657). It was an experiment I had long wished to carry out, seeking to experience human diversity without the need to maintain the so-called academic critical distance. I wished to set aside this distance that academics are trained to cultivate in order to experience the marginalization I knew my colleagues suffered from for being black, or gay, or female, or any combination of those.

To make this Seminar work, I made sure that its initial membership would place me in the minority by these criteria. Then, to give us a scaffold on which to hang our initially awkward conversations, I arranged that members would take turns choosing a book for us all to discuss. Through these discussions we came to know one another as real people, not representatives of any particular group. The Seminar served its purpose almost immediately, as we came to see one another through these books we had read. I remain friends with many of the members of this Seminar. Though it lasted only a few years, it remains an example of the freedom that the Seminars have always had to persist, mutate, or go senescent as their members may wish.

My literature humanities teacher in 1957–58, Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures Robert Belknap (1929–2014), became the fourth director of University Seminars, from 2001 to 2011. I have no better way to introduce him here than to tell a story about him that I originally told at his 2014 memorial service in St. Paul's Chapel. Belknap and I had a conversation just before Thanksgiving 2013. He had invited me to succeed him as director of the University Seminars in 2010–11, and we would often enjoy each other's company in our offices in Faculty House.

"Bob," I asked him, "how many years have your family celebrated Thanksgiving?"

Knowing that Belknaps were on the *Mayflower*, I expected a big number, in the hundreds of years; I waited to bask in the reflected light of his ancestry. "Oh," he said, "about five thousand, or ten thousand years."

"How?" I asked.

"Well" he said, "you don't think I am going to remember my *Mayflower* ancestors and not my native ancestors too, do you?"

In that he taught me how much of our country's history is built on the forgotten cultures of native peoples. He also taught me to think again before valuing any of my ancestors over any others, and in the largest sense to remember that as a person, my thoughts, my life, my decisions, and my actions define me—not my ancestry, and certainly not my DNA.

I will close this review of my predecessors with a reflection on the remarkable variety of lifetimes that the Seminars have had. Three of the first University Seminars to be formed, in the mid-1940s, are still thriving: The Problem of Peace (#403), Studies in Religion (#405), and The Renaissance (#407). As I write this, I have been director for eight years. In that time more than a dozen new Seminars have been proposed, discussed by our Advisory Board, approved, and gotten under way. In the same period, almost the same number of Seminars have voluntarily taken a year off. Those that do not come back after a year are formally decommissioned.

Here is perhaps the best example of the difference between the University Seminars and any hypothetical "Seminars University." Consistent with our founder's intentions, each Seminar may have its own arc of experience and its own lifetime as well; there is no tenure, no obligation to be permanent, nor even an obligation to be important, only an obligation to be clear and to be willing to listen.

In these different ways, I have learned from each of my predecessors how to protect and preserve the freedom that each Seminar has to decide our purposes, our protocols, and our topics for discussion. The hundreds of books and public events that the University Seminars have supported have all emerged from one or more of the Seminars themselves, a permanent but ever-changing monument to the power and freedom that Tannenbaum's and Belo's vision has passed on to us and, through us, into the unknowable future.

The University Seminars have never been the product of any director, nor even of their own membership. They have always been served by a cadre of dedicated colleagues who have administered funds, reservations, an archive, and meals and wine so that each Seminar might have its own life.

Let me close by thanking our colleagues who maintain the Faculty House and those who make our Faculty House office a welcoming and serious place: Alice Newton, Summer Hart, Pamela Guardia, Gesenia Alvarez, and John Jayo. I know they join me in hoping that you will enjoy these essays by our Seminars colleagues.