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*Introduction: Materializing Democracy and
Other Political Fantasies*



Democracy, for most U.S. Americans, is like the air we breathe: we live in it, we know it sustains us, we take it in out of reflex, and yet we give little thought to its shape, texture, or composition. Any appeal to democracy automatically assumes a political stance. But the appeal to democracy also takes form as an antipolitical gesture that closes down disagreement, contestation, and meaningful conflict. Attempts to deploy democracy in our political language, to activate it as a word and a concept in ways that gesture toward its symbolic depth, its historical complexity, and its open possibilities often only track across emptied-out clichés in a nationalist landscape. The short-circuiting of civic imagination about our supposedly most prized political ethic raises a question that undergirds the various theoretical and historicist aims of this volume: How might people define—let alone redefine—a political form that they know as intimately as the air that fills their lungs?

So familiar an ideal to citizens as to be *unfamiliar* in any “real” or specifically definitional sense—in short, so thoroughly naturalized as “common sense”—democracy in official as well as popular usage seems beyond contest or historical nuance. This inability to think critically about what is theoretically all around us—what we might consider the opacity of democracy—seems inherent to the first stirrings of popular government in the United States. Tom Paine’s widely quoted (but seldom carefully studied) rendition of “common sense” democracy invokes a government that, in contrast to monarchical systems, is “formed on more natural principles.”¹ Even as reliance on the “natural” suggests democracy’s judicious authority, it also locates democracy outside history as though it were not the ongoing product of human effort, intervention, and contestation. Construed as a people’s natural resource, democracy seems in need of conservation and protection. The question is, however, protection from what? Too often, the

answer has assumed democracy not as a political process but as a sacred or reified thing to be safeguarded from popular usage, interpretation, and redefinition. Abraham Lincoln developed a parable to caution against this hypostatization of democracy, comparing democratic principles as given in the Declaration of Independence to a golden apple protected by the silver frame of the Constitution. “The picture was made, not to *conceal*, or *destroy* the apple; but to *adorn* and *preserve* it,” explains Lincoln. “The picture was made for the apple—not the apple for the picture.”² Yet Lincoln’s formulation also aestheticizes the political, immuring democracy within stable structures that withstand the revisionary activities of the *demos*. Under the governmental structures and formal operations of the state, democracy has been confused with the walls that legislatively contain the people, a physical fact not the dynamic action created among the people themselves. Thus absented from the production of democracy, people have no sense that it is theirs to define. Rather, they worship at its walls. Formal procedures, legal institutions, and administrative frameworks corral democracy into predictable patterns. This reorganization of political possibility as political form seems, as Hannah Arendt puts it, “not the results of action but the products of [another’s] making,” not something people do but a structure that preexists them.³

Democracy itself is not something U.S. citizens argue much about. Instead, in the wake of Watergate, Irangate, and Monicagate what gets argued about is nonpolitical, moral categories: trust and privatized notions of ethics. In the most recent U.S. presidential election, candidates insisted on the importance of revitalizing the connection between democracy and trust.⁴ In this popular debate, citizens and elected officials engage in a relation of faith rather than a negotiation of collective interests. In this way, democracy retreats to an exclusively moral category that is no longer interconnected with political, economic, or social categories.

The quality of civic trust is thus held open as a substitute for political debate as, for instance, when Robert Putnam laments an erosion of civic spirit in the United States. He looks beyond the usual data confirming a lack of voter interest to concentrate on a civic decline of another sort—the tendency of people to bowl alone apart from organized leagues: “Whether or not bowling beats balloting in the eyes of most Americans, bowling teams illustrate yet another vanishing form of social capital.” Putnam both encourages more participation and speaks to a widespread anxiety that voluntary association and other modes of political life have become deadened. And people have been listening. The folksy research of

this Harvard scholar has played well in chats at the White House, on radio talk shows, and in Internet interviews. For Putnam, the malaise of American democracy becomes evident in an “overall decrease in social trust.”⁵ But again, his diagnosis rests precisely on “common sense” notions of U.S. democracy that mystify the political through recourse to nonpolitical categories like “nature” and “trust.” It corroborates a widespread belief that democracy should somehow rest outside the political—indeed, should be a reprieve from politics. Putnam’s analysis deftly sidesteps the way “social capital,” like all capital, is unequally distributed. We need to intervene in that problem politically, not trust that neighborliness will help us mind it less.

This book critiques a democracy that does not equate with politics. The problem we see is that democracy has become both an object of administrative technology and a subject of nationalism to the extent that its politicalness is either foreshortened or evacuated. To return democracy to the political is not to substitute democracy for the political, however. Fascism is also political. Instead, the task is to apprehend and analyze “democracy” as a historical range of practices, embedded in and managed by institutions and produced by material conditions. Thus while this methodological commitment to democracy is political, it is important to recognize that not all political modalities (even those operating in the “name” of democracy) invite open debate about their forms, practices, and goals.

NATURAL “DEMOCRACY”

In its highly assumed but vaguely articulated form at the start of the twenty-first century, then, commonsense democracy depends on antidemocratic moves that encourage our participation in a romantic ideal of civil life while discouraging our participation in gritty dialogues about the political (pre)conditions for community. It is good for neighbors to talk. But what socioeconomic requirements must first be satisfied and what phobias about race, immigration, sexuality, and class must be overcome before those neighborly conversations can even begin? As important, what kinds of neighborhoods never come into being?

These seldom-asked questions sustain the observation of a century ago that, when it comes to “equal laws” and “political equality,” the native citizen “can neither feel nor understand” how U.S. institutions and traditions secure freedom and opportunity. This charge that Americans undertheorize and thus underappreciate democratic politics appears in a five-hundred-page overview of U.S.

history, population, geography, immigration, and economic fortunes, titled *Triumphant Democracy*, by Andrew Carnegie. With the claim that his status as a non-native-born citizen guarantees him an Archimedean vantage, Carnegie takes his place in the tradition of Alexis de Tocqueville, Francis Trollope, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Theodor Adorno, and Sacvan Bercovitch, all of whom with varying degrees of scorn and celebration evaluate the theory and practice of democracy in America. And what Carnegie perceives is that American democracy (and intellectual inquiry about democracy) is beyond politics. In this intellectual, patriotic, and familiar definition, American democracy triumphs over political democracy. Established as a space of consensus and registering time as a transhistory that obviates the need for historical analysis, the United States is “a land which has finally settled all fundamental political problems and now rests at peace upon the rock of the political equality of the citizen.”⁶ In this incarnation, democracy is lived out as some unquestioning reflex—that is, citizens meet state and national political expectations without pause *or* analysis—and Carnegie touts this as its principal virtue. Here democracy is neither a moral category nor a neighborly virtue: it is a physiological response like swallowing or like what one’s leg does when the doctor taps the knee. Democracy is America’s default reflex, its parameters and properties rarely subjected to a critical view that could suggest that political forms and rhetoric are other than the result of a natural course of events.

It is not hard from this vantage to peg Carnegie’s theories about democracy-above-the-people as supplying their (fictionalized) assent to a philosophy of liberal individualism and industrial capitalism where the bosses inevitably know better than do regular citizens. To consent to that definition is to surrender democracy as though it were just a husk to be filled with apologies for—or an engine to be managed for the sake of—mass inequality, mass ignorance, mass apathy, or mass unsuitedness.⁷ The contributors to this volume oppose that surrender as well as its correlatively false affirmation of a “freedom and opportunity” that many people neither experience nor know to miss in the first place. This unmourned lack of democratic actuality—how can we mourn what we never possessed?—nonetheless throbs at times with political sensation as though the commitment to economic justice, continuing and accessible public debate, and other democratic practices had become a phantom limb. As they question the right of men like Carnegie to define democracy for a putatively slack-jawed citizenry, the essays collected here aim toward recuperating public democratic sensibilities. But a project (such as this) of professional intellectuals proffering academic analyses

may be structurally closer to Carnegie's position than to that of the "mass." In the context of a growing desire within humanities academia to be more public-minded, engaged, and relevant, some of the contributors to this volume turn a self-critical eye toward their own ongoing professional-managerial culture investments in "raising" public sensibility and "fixing" democracy rather than taking (an often far less grand) part in democracy's developing politicization.

Rather than being reluctant, cynical, or embarrassed about the possibilities of democracy, contributors to this volume insist on its often unrealized and even radical promises. The authors of these essays argue that any understanding of democracy will inevitably be an incomplete position in a much larger dialogue—in short, that democracy is a process and not a definition. Understanding democracy as simultaneously a debatable sociopolitical praxis and a theoretical horizon is central to repoliticizing its meaning and recuperating the idea of the political for all its practitioners.

If political theorist Sheldon Wolin's germinal formulation of politicalness—"our capacity for developing into beings who know and value what it means to participate in and be responsible for the care and improvement of our common and collective life"—was overly optimistic in its tacit idealization of the common, it has been helpfully supplemented by political theorists like Bonnie Honig and William Connolly, both of whom gesture toward the recuperation of democratic politicality as a practice of functional disunity.⁸ Each critic differently highlights aspects of political practice and theorizing that idealize a system of action or inquiry that will effect some kind of national/communal unity, a unity that would mark the end of political work. Differently from Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's supplemental formula of "democracy *and* disagreement," Honig and Connolly posit democracy *as* disagreement, a political process where "resolution" should only ever be conditional and temporary.⁹ They thus reverse the negative valuation given to disagreement and politics in both political theory and public culture, insisting that what we have been trying to "solve" and even end on behalf of democracy is precisely its best and most vital aspect.

In Honig's and Connolly's arguments, the enabling condition for radical democracy is the ongoing cultivation of disagreement and difference, a reconceptualization of democracy as a more open-ended practice of, in theorist William Corlett's phrase, "community without unity."¹⁰ Not aggregated around a single conceptual or consensual point, the cleavages of disunified community create multiple sites of address that do not feel compelled to speak *for* each other or speak *to* each other by sacrificing the historical accents of specific cultural idioms.

Not controlled by a single national consciousness, such a community *does not need* to repress the fractious materials that threaten the organization of community. Community without unity allows the uncanny citizens that Priscilla Wald sees inhabiting the United States to lay claim to representation.¹¹ Corlett thus urges, in a way that echoes Putnam's legitimate concerns, that we "use *community* without teleology" to create a life- and politics-enhancing commitment to what is not bound in our human relations by the rational and the instrumental, one that takes greater account of "accident and chance," play, unreason (*dérailson*), and the human possibilities for extravagance together in a way that does not make a political or social "unity" its goal.¹²

OTHER POLITICAL FANTASIES

What falls outside the governing structure of reason may be our fantasies about what a materialized democracy would entail in terms of intellectual communication, pedagogy, familial and workplace structures, public space, sexual possibility, and identity practices. If we accept that the best energies of democracy are nonformal, the project of rethinking and reworking democracy seems difficult and scary. But it is possible to see that the terms of "difficulty" are generated by the formal rational system of law, procedure, and administration that manages political possibility, framing—perhaps falsely—what lies "inside" and "outside" democracy's purview. Rather than shy away from such supposed "inconvenience," "unruliness," and "unpredictability," a cohort of theorists have embraced concepts of democracy that refuse to take a preprogrammed shape as teleology. Instead, these theorists, working in interdisciplinary and international conjunctures, suggest that we might pattern democracy through the terms of affect, desire, unpredictability, and contingency.

C. Douglas Lummis in *Radical Democracy* seeks to correct critics, political thinkers, and policymakers who misrecognize democracy as the reasonable operation of the free market, nation-state allegiance, or other institutional affiliation. "Democracy is better described not as a 'system' or a set of institutions," writes Lummis, "but as a state of being and that the transition to it is not an institutional founding but a 'change of state.'" ¹³ This slippage between governmental state and metaphysical state, between state and state of being, opens up the subject of democracy itself, identifying democratic energies as questions of affect and feeling, unofficial contacts and random encounters, and episodic rituals and informal narratives—as well as traditionally recognized formal political practices.

Likewise, Chantal Mouffe dissociates democratic subjects from the narrowness of a legal status (such as citizenship) defined by the state. This reworking of the Tocquevillean formula so that all subjects are not exhausted by citizenship creates democracy as an open proposition always under construction where debate, dialogue, and contestation are continuous. “Radical democracy also means the radical impossibility of a fully achieved democracy,” writes Mouffe.¹⁴ If democracy is indeed under construction, it is best conceived as an undertaking that proceeds without a single set of blueprints. While an overarching vision would no doubt hasten completion of a “democratic” edifice, this project does not imagine politics as a single structure but as a host of habitats that combine, intersect, clash, and recombine in unexpected ways. Attending to structures of feeling and noninstitutional forms of political life reveals democracy as a messy prospect—the trick, as these various theorists suggest, is to resist the compulsion to clean up the mess by deadening the vibrancy or reducing the complexity of human political interactions.

Democracy can thus seemingly produce a bit of *mise-en-abyme*: in democracy, writes Claude Lefort, “the locus of power is an empty place, it cannot be occupied—it is such that no individual and no group can be consubstantial with it—and it cannot be represented.”¹⁵ The presumed risk, clearly, is that democracy tends to dematerialize under such accounts to the point where its real-world potential melts into air. At one moment, the unfocused aspect of power suggests democracy as a mirage, its appearance forever vanishing over the political horizon. At the next, democracy resists mediation or abstraction and can only be a direct experience that precedes the moment of representation. But what if our concern for form is the mirage? Even if its power is dispersed and its form remains open and indeterminate, democracy takes up space—psychically as well as politically and socially. As the authors in this volume argue, practices of democracy produce emotion and thought, inflict pain and healing, engender memory and amnesia, and organize and limit community as well as political action. And this sort of democracy has material effects on subjects and citizens.

A commitment to loosening the formalist rendition of democracy does not mean we are reaching for some impossible formlessness as utopian alternative. Even the mirage—the empty place of power—takes a certain form, however hazy. Form is inescapable, both in terms of the larger structures that support, administer, and hinder political action as well as the larger processes that create political actors. Indeed, it is this latter set of processes that target subjects in their most intimate recesses. One useful reading of democracy reminds us that, from its

production of the citizen to its mobilization of collective power, any institutionalized practice of democracy serves as a technology that operates on, recognizes, legitimizes, and circumscribes—that is, forms—political actors. How does democracy organize politics into manageable or knowable formations? To what extent does democratic subjectivity require subjection? These questions concern political theorist Barbara Cruikshank: “Although I am deeply sympathetic to the project of radical or participatory democracy, I am skeptical that such a project presents an answer to questions of power, inequality, and political participation. Like any mode of government, democracy both enables and constrains the possibilities for political action.” Citizenship functions as a technology that offers opportunities for participation in governance—provided that actors consent to occupy the calculable, governable space of citizen. Democracy-in-practice trades on various degrees of coercion and liberty. “The citizen is an effect and an instrument of political power rather than simply a participant in politics,” writes Cruikshank.¹⁶

Insight into the effects of democracy, then, demands a material sensibility of power broader and more diverse than that implied by a materialist analysis of class. This introduction, like the essays that follow, stakes approaches that register the political as a multidisciplinary (even antidisiplinary), dense terrain of representation, psychology, aesthetics, sexuality, media, and so forth. Democracy, no matter how liberating a project, can never free itself of this terrain; democracy always remains impacted with antidemocratic residues, no matter how good citizens feel about their present or how effective amnesia has been.

DEMOCRATIC VISTAS

This is what *Materializing Democracy* will not do: we will not describe democracy in the terms of total freedom, good leadership, nationalist cant, protective institutionalism, rational rule, happy communitarianism, rigid formalism, transcendental formlessness, smug liberalism, or First Worldism. Instead, the contributors treat democracy as a constructed category in order to understand what conditions of thought and practice make it more and less possible, more and less livable, more and less emancipatory.

In reopening the question of democracy in this particular way, the essays in this book sidestep the temptation of formulating questions for the clean answer. Instead they pose a complex and open-ended investigation, which might be summarized as responding to what appears as a fairly simple question: *What*

makes democracy matter? This volume adds to the conversation about radical democracy and its (forestalled) possibilities and, in particular, focuses for literary and cultural studies some critical convergences that interrogate the following:

- The tendency of democracy to become nonpolitical either by returning to foundations that are assumed to be beyond contestation and thus *pre*-political or by searching for new consensual spaces that are emptied of debate and are thus *post*political
- The ambivalent relationship of democracy to formalism, especially in terms of legal apparatuses invested with the power to make citizens both appear and disappear (this does not mean, however, that democracy lies just over the horizon in zones of formlessness)
- The convergence of political and aesthetic apparatuses in popular representative praxis, engendering cultural practices that shape democratic memory and its loss
- The structures of enfranchisement that depoliticize citizens and install subjects as the investments of professional-managerial culture
- The relationship of affect and democracy, examining how forms of democracy are lived and felt with particular attention to the modes of feeling that enhance, sentimentalize, spiritualize, or block democratization
- The relationship of intellectuals to democracy and tensions between theoretical and practical approaches to democracy that emerge from this relationship
- The issue of what cultivates intellectual alienation and public disconnection from a sense of entitlement to political engagement

Two main lines of inquiry collate these concerns. In the first, the essays gathered here seek to understand the felt importance of democracy. This project entails examinations of the forces that make democracy matter to people in their day-to-day lives. Democracy is translated with varying degrees of success not just governmentally but also at more intimate levels of consciousness, feeling, and body. The idea (and ideal) of democracy transmutes into tangible (inter)personal effects and no less tangible dreams and nightmares. What histories and injustices make us want democracy? And at the same time, we need also to question the sources of prestige, privilege, and entitlement that dispose us to be indifferent toward the development of democracy. The critics in this volume, working from multiple and often colliding perspectives, problematize and pluralize democracy's histories and possibilities, its significance for politics and

human freedom(s). The intent of this critical project is not to invalidate democracy. Quite the opposite: by making explicit and reexamining assumptions about equality and fairness that too often work toward opposite effects we hope to strengthen commitments to the messy, ongoing political work of democracy.

In its second line of inquiry, this volume gives shape and historical texture to the materials of democracy. It studies how democracy is made material—materially feasible and materially important and worth struggling for. This arena of examination insists on reading “matter” in a quasi-empirical way, as a sensuous category of thought, experience, and feeling or as an embodied practice. Political theorists have a well-developed critique of the relation of capital to democracy, but few have analyzed from a radical vantage how the cultural products of capital have or might work toward (re)building democracy. How central are materials such as public space, novels, advice manuals, celebrities, mass communication technology, classrooms, or prisons to the building of democracy? To think about the diverse ways that democracy matters and can matter is multiply to attend to the bodies, physical spaces, and lost memories that have witnessed the appearance and disappearance of democracy’s manifestations.

Descriptions of democracy typically run along two different axes: one is plotted with specific reference points attentive to history and cultural difference and the other with more abstract, timeless coordinates. As this *demographic* storyline goes, material reality and empowering sociopolitical vision will converge at some future juncture that witnesses the earthly realization of an ideal political form. But these lines have yet to meet—and they never will—because of constitutive tensions between and within the material and the democratic. The essays in this volume stop trying to force that convergence, stop feeling sorry about its deferral, and turn to different ways of working at and thinking about democracy for the here and now. In counterpoising *materializing* democracy to *theorizing* democracy, then, we are not motivated by the hope that such a move will suture the unmatched edges between the ideal and the real, general and local, universal and particular, homogeneity and heterogeneity, equalization and equality, social harmony and dissensus, and cohesion and mess. Instead, these essays work to break apart the “self-evident” intelligibility of these binaries and agitate for new configurations of democratic possibility.

The project we are outlining here does not reject the customary aims of democracy theory but rather recoordinates them. Even before 1789 or 1776 broad declarations of general principles have been in vogue, and yet rarely have these historical expressions of theoretical equality translated into hard-and-fast pol-

icies that do the work of developing self-governance and generalizing political freedom. Indeed, the rhetoric of equality—“all men” or even “all persons”—has subtended theoretical dispositions to override the political identities of subgroups and subalterns that compromise this “all.” The vagueness of much democracy theory with regard to its human interactants is, in Bruce Robbins’s view, a habit mined with political danger and pragmatic costs: “[We] do not know how to argue for the democracy we want without mobilizing an image of the public so hazy, idealized, and distant from the actual people, places, and institutions around us that it can easily serve purposes that are anything but democratic.”¹⁷ Too often in thinking about alternative democracies, theorizing means getting too much distance from both history and politics. Too often we appreciate the *vox populi* from the safe distance of a corrective schema that soothingly allows us to forget the dissonance, discordance, and disagreement that structures democratic polity.

We want to underscore without cynically giving up on radical democracy the ways that democracy is built out of direct *and* mediated uses of power and knowledge. Its various forms recognize and will not transcend historical conditions. Democracy’s inability to exist outside of the concrete circumstances, events, and human particularity that cannot be subsumed under (or sanitized through) general accounts or descriptions literally disestablishes democracy *as* theoretical. Yet democracy’s tenacious hold on the visceral and the contingent does not extend so far as to render it antitheoretical. Insofar as democracy describes a world that does not exist, it needs to take the form of theoretical narrative somewhat like a fantasy or counterfactual reality that we struggle to realize. But, as a material practice, democracy works toward actualizing the parameters and principles we theorize for it.

Democracy can’t be imposed by model, and intellectuals shouldn’t mistake their analytic “success” with the (antidemocratic) dream of fixing democracy for the rest of us. To confront this desire is to begin analyzing the psychopolitical dynamics and the repressed realities and histories of the “democracy” we live in. So familiar that the national collective body always already seems to know what it is, but so unfamiliar that America’s desegregated bodies (women, queers, racial minorities, South American and Asian immigrants, the underclasses, etc.) dream more than encounter its realization, democracy takes on the structure of the uncanny. Framed by constructive histories we can’t seem to remember, and by crimes we cannot forget, democracy involves cycles of repression and obsession. This is not a theoretical postulate but a real problem, because in order to begin

acting on commitments to equality, fairness, justice, and freedom, this argument would suggest that we have to make conscious and work through our desires for and fears of democratic politics. And it is a problem of the real as well: on one hand notions of *realpolitik*, backed up by data and empirical estimates, limit citizens' understandings of democracy to what has been attempted before; on the other, members of the polity fail to face up to what really happened—"removal," internment, and slavery—in the past.

This volume thus gears itself toward understanding both the material effects of U.S. "democratic" political psychology and its dreamwork, the compensatory fantasies brought on by antidemocratic conditions that come to stand in as "democracy." How historically transparent and psychopolitically straightforward are desires for freedom and equality? In what ways do seemingly unrelated investments in familial and "private" practices alternately (or simultaneously) make possible and forestall wider democratic possibilities? How deeply attached are we to relationships of (our own) powerlessness within democracy?

The supposed futility of democratic critique is a specific malady of contemporary academic culture. So routine is this accusation that it is hard not to start wondering about the compulsive nature of the professoriate to bow its head, proclaim its worthlessness, and accept such allegations as true. To that end, the essays in this book mark a particular moment in humanities academic thinking on the subject of democracy, its radical possibilities for changing our worlds both inside and beyond our immediate work spaces. Interdisciplinary movements in academia have combined with the institutional entry and academic development of oppositional identity politics like race, ethnic and postcolonial studies, women's studies, and queer studies in ways that have radically changed the discourses, members, and operations of the university. Such changes, too often token in nature, are nonetheless susceptible to backlash and retrenchment. The contributors to this volume grew up as professionals in this institutional generation, and from it they respond to debates about the role of the humanities in articulating the duties and promoting the values of citizenship. In the decades leading up to the close of the twentieth century, polemics ranging from E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* to Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins* have stressed the connection between the disciplines of the "liberal arts" and the discipline of the nation-state. From a host of materials ranging from popular icons and celebrities to "high-brow" texts of democratic theory, the essays gathered together here assemble an archive of democracy that coordinates readings of citizenship along different levels of culture (high, low, middling, and regional). Their scope implies an

archive open to the public. Alexis de Tocqueville and Ralph Waldo Emerson appear in these pages, but Will Rogers, Monica Lewinsky, Princess Diana, and other figures who shape and are shaped by public imaginations are just as significant. These essays reconsider the academic and political arenas within which intellectual work takes place, and they look to other spaces for rethinking and reworking democratic possibility. Even as they ask what sort of material or practical approaches to politics are outlined and imagined by this cultural archive, they also ask if this cultural archive can provide, in Judith Butler's terms, a contingent foundation for democratic rearticulation.¹⁸ That is, although we raise questions about the adequacy of this archive to help in actualizing radical democracy, we insist that the culture of democracy—which for the essays in this volume includes musicals, slave narratives, undergraduate classrooms, radio broadcasts, managerial practices—is indispensable to historicizing and mapping heterogeneous political possibilities.

Materializing Democracy asks how we can self-critically and critically regroup in ways that will help expand our own commitment to, ideas about, and tolerance for democracy. And there are some precise components to this critical project and our aim to make democracy matter more now. We are asking questions that address our inability to narrate democracy's shadow histories and speak forthrightly about our complex fantasies about it. Why can't we make democracy face up to the material? Why can't those of us dedicated to democracy risk having fantasies about the material without fearing this exercise of imagination as a disavowal of radical politics? That is, are projects that envision the equitable distribution of social resources (such as justice, decision making, claims to representation, and access to dialogue) anything more than fantasies? And if such projects are to remain unrealizable, what is the status of fantasy within the field of the political?

CROSS-CONVERSATIONS

In addressing the questions stated above, the essays gathered in this volume tell different sorts of stories. Some of these stories are more narratival than others; others assemble nonliterary archives; still others emerge from an intimate relation to experience. Yet they all share commitments to narrative as material practice. Neither a maneuver to retain aesthetic categories nor a bow to a post-modern world where anything goes, a methodological focus on narrative references politics as a complex set of stories that recuperates material that tradi-

tionally has been relegated to putatively nonpolitical spheres, housed under ideologies of the domestic, sentimental, spiritual, or personal. Narrative is, first of all, the stuff that too often gets left out of politics. Categories like citizenship, mechanisms like representation, and values like consensus often appear without any prehistory, as though there were no stories of power that stood behind such norms. We insist, however, that there is no way to engage democracy except through such categories, mechanisms, and values that stand in for a densely complex history of material relations that had to be first smoothed out, ignored, forgotten, or sorted and hierarchized in order to proclaim a particular version of democracy as a normative value.

In addition to recuperating excluded material, the understanding of democracy as narrative practice loosely implies a methodology that avoids routing all stories into metanarratives of liberal consensus or social contract. Instead, narrative is always provisional, never settling into ossified forms or incontrovertible precedents. For even as narrative suggests a fuller history than can be supplied by mere political categories, it also invites revision. Under these terms, stories—like a vibrant sense of the political—are constantly evolving and are subject to popular revision and rife with transformative potential. Stories represent, document, and, most important, reconstruct reality. Democratic politics hinge on this same attitude toward sociopolitical reality. Just as narrative reorders events and tinkers with and transforms circumstances, we need a politics that can think about the justice, equality, mutual respect, and all the other democratic prospects that in our current sociopolitical reality are “mere utopia.”¹⁹

Donald Pease returns to one of the foundational narratives of American democracy. In his reading of Tocqueville, Pease finds that this originary pattern tends powerfully to devolve into antipolitical fantasy. Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, he argues, is beset by “negative hallucinations” that induce Tocqueville and a host of contemporary political commentators *not* to see actually existing material conditions that compromise democracy, and thus also to miss more radical democratic energies. In this unreal but widely accepted reading of U.S. culture and political institutions, American democracy is retrofitted with an aristocratic sensibility for cohesion that mutes the importance of civic unpredictability and deep social cleavages.

Behind the ritualistic story of “democracy in America” lies a much less talked about story of unfreedom that routinely makes use of imprisonment, solitary confinement, and the death penalty. Joan Dayan confronts this contradiction head-on by examining the legal genealogy of slavery that remains in force today,

stripping away the personhood of modern prisoners. Moving from medieval codes to contemporary legal decisions, Dayan pays close attention to what she calls the legal sorcery of the law—that is, the supernatural power of the state to make living citizens into civilly dead subjects—and its role in underpinning the formal operations of justice. This interest in rituals of exclusion also motivates Richard Flores’s study of cultural imperialism along the Texas-Mexico border. U.S. democratic nationalism, Flores suggests, has long imagined Mexicans as prosthetic limbs (“wetbacks” and “braceros”) to booster an anemic economy. Through readings of John Wayne’s *The Alamo* and talk radio paranoia about the official currency of Spanish in El Cenizo, Texas, Flores reveals how the production of racial, linguistic, and cultural difference limits participation in democracy’s public sphere.

As Dayan and Flores outline the gothic effects of democratic exclusions, Russ Castronovo starts by unpacking nineteenth-century fascination with the occult. He maps how constructions of “the soul” create a kind of political morbidity, setting depoliticized limits for the very political conditions in this world. Reading various manifestations of the occult from clairvoyance to slave superstition as activities of political theorizing, he reveals how heavenly visions of spiritual equality mask the inequalities of an abstract public sphere. The importance of the soul did not die out in the nineteenth century: contemporary defenses of higher education are haunted by notions of spirituality that threaten, as Castronovo contends, to erase the privilege and hierarchy reproduced by humanities discourse. Like Dayan, Flores, and Castronovo, Lauren Berlant suggests the dead as a point of political cathexis, but her point of connection is different from the socially dead or civilly dead persons of the previous essays. Interrogating the political forms that produce persons and non-persons, Berlant takes up two pedagogical mechanisms that have historically supported the liberal fantasy of a redemptive national future: the expansion of the vote (here specifically woman suffrage) and public fantasies that surround the dead-too-soon celebrity. Celebrity worship offers a model of citizenship fused to a popular death wish. Here, Berlant sees the triumph of women’s politics, “the politics of a higher viscera” guiding what she terms “the new formalism of liberal citizenship.”

If Berlant attacks the pacifying inclusive politics of liberalism for their deadening effects, Lisa Duggan exposes neoliberalism’s growing addiction to exclusion in the name of liberalization. In the literature of the Independent Gay Forum (IGF), Duggan charts the emergence of centrist gay politics that seek to shrink rather than expand the public sphere. By locating the IGF proponents along a

trajectory of gay activism from the 1950s to 1990s that has steadily flowed toward the mainstream, Duggan outlines serious possible consequences in the tendency of sexual political rhetoric to scale back its claims for equality and freedom to privatized spaces and nonpolitical forms. Chris Castiglia, somewhat differently, investigates the possibilities of private affect for reinvigorating persons left cynical by the U.S. government's false promises to and betrayals of its citizens. Turning to the musical's dramatization of interiority, such as the confession and the crush, he reevaluates and opens up scenes of sentimental privacy to public engagement. He looks to scorned citizens, notably Hester Prynne and Monica Lewinsky, as subjects who theatricalize emotion to ground a radically democratic impulse to replace heteronormative, abstract commitments with local, deeply felt forms of trust.

Whereas Castiglia's essay is concerned with the regenerative possibilities of the musical as political theater, Dana Nelson stresses the need to link democracy to counteraesthetic modes of representation. When we try to make democracy manageable or coherent, as she suggests Emerson does in *Representative Men*, we close down its capacity to produce disagreement and difference, which, however unpleasing or unsightly, are indispensable to real democratic vitality. Nelson instead argues that we take our cue from Rebecca Harding Davis's post-Civil War novel *Waiting for the Verdict*, which prefers open-ended conflicts to virtual forms of democracy. Democracy, in short, is difficult to represent, and may well not be amenable to representative substitution. Wai Chee Dimock's essay suggests that one reason for this difficulty is that it is hard to imagine a nonabsolute space in which rights, justice, and equality can materialize in ways that will allow for negotiation. By breaking down the idea of space to the level of its epistemological assumption and turning to Einstein's specific rejection of Kantian "absolute space," she opts for a relativist model of rights. As her essay explores the interstices of law, science, and local-color literature it visibly demonstrates that the ethical implications of the search for justice cannot be limited to the structural coordinates of a single formal domain.

Michael Moon invokes a different kind of attention to space in his case study of Will Rogers, the Cherokee cowboy philosopher who used his comedy and commentary routinely to contest the absolute spatiality of the western frontier. Moon examines how Rogers's apparently apolitical career moves from vaudeville and newspapers to the entertainment industry of radio, film, and television was in fact an improvisatory diplomacy, a subtle use of new media to carry on Native American diplomacy by other means. His essay combats the institutional am-

nesia that has depoliticized Rogers's legacy by turning him into a "unique" representative of the Cherokee, a representation that overshadows the collective politics that Rogers sought to further. Kevin Gaines helps place such concerns in internationalist context in his historicization of the democratic struggle advanced by black feminist politics. But this historicization is no easy task: a pathology of "black female belatedness" makes black women's political contributions to resistance and nationalism appear as a secondary effect of black militancy.²⁰ Examining the politics that gather in Toni Cade Bambara's germinal anthology *The Black Woman*, Gaines recovers a sense of revolution that interconnects diasporic contexts with everyday gender relations and ethical commitments to equality.

The value of rethinking legacies of the Left provides a broad focus for the final three essays in this volume. Chris Newfield turns to Bambara's provocative assertion that "revolution begins with the self, in the self," insisting that the Left has too often compromised on individual agency in its theorizing about democracy, and has for this reason too easily capitulated to neoliberalism's insistence that markets are the best providers for individual freedom. Newfield maintains that left critiques must develop around the ways that "democracy frees the self where markets do not." He urges left critics to notice the "widespread demoralization that accompanies procedural democracy in the United States," and he contends that we can better promote a full democratic project by focusing at the level of individual liberation not the individual as we liberally know it but a revolutionized subject conceptualized through the ideal of "unburdened agency." Jeffrey Goldfarb turns his focus toward the individual as intellectual in an essay on the role of liberal arts education by asking how intellectuals act in support of democracy, and how intellectual activity can work at cross-purposes with democracy. Applying lessons learned in the democratization of Eastern Europe, Goldfarb contends that too often intellectuals have substituted theories and ideology for democratic deliberation in our classrooms. This substitution closes debate, and in so doing it contributes to the narrowing of the very practices of openness and civility that characterize intellectual democratic work.

The legacy of a Left now discredited after the collapse of most existing socialist projects also haunts Wendy Brown's contribution to this volume. Refusing to be either paralyzed or entranced by the ghosts of the Left that still walk the halls of academia, Brown suggests a politics located beyond identity; that is, a post-identity politics that rejects the easy and quick condemnations of gender discrimination, censorship, homophobia, state-sponsored liberalism, and so forth

and instead undertakes a “more serious project of transformation.” To this end, she adduces distinctions between political morality and the political moralism that characterizes too often today what passes for radical politics.

This overview risks smoothing out the fault lines that crisscross this volume. That’s not the aim of our work. Rather, we hope such fissures will rupture for the reader into the productive disagreements characteristic of democracy. For example, although Castiglia and Newfield turn to what we might think of Tocqueville’s “habits of the heart” for the twenty-first century in examinations of radical affect and revamped individualism, Berlant and Castronovo differently argue that inwardness too often tends toward or results in a regressive, antipolitical position. Such tensions also characterize the very different kinds of positions that our contributors take on the roles of minorities within democracy. For instance, Flores and Dayan would seemingly agree that a white majoritarian bias functions as a structural block to full democratic realization, whereas Moon and Gaines would seem to insist that democracy’s best energies and movements toward reformulation come from its outsiders. Or, to take another example, the level of hope for democracy varies from essay to essay (and from moment to moment within essays). Duggan fears that the public sphere is shrinking to a neoconservative rendition of sexual politics. Dayan concludes that the autonomous zone occupied by the individual is systematically being destroyed. Nelson seemingly records the vanishing of democratic energies within abstract systems of representation. But contrapuntal notes sound, for instance, in the essays by Dimock, Brown, and Goldfarb, which suggest a range of performances and performative sites from writing to teaching as interventions against the antidemocratic practices of state and professional institutions.

As we hope we have made clear, we’ve gathered these essays together not because they share some singular thematic focus on a particular vision of democracy but because they provoke argument and discussion.²¹ Democracy is too rich and too freighted to be simply an idea to play variations on. Rather it is a type of knowledge, a structure of feeling, and a methodological problem. It is, moreover, an ethical engagement and a practice of recovery. And maybe it can be a historical destiny, if we keep working at it.

NOTES

1 Thomas Paine, *Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. Nelson F. Adkins (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 30. We see a difference between the way Paine is

- used in the American “democratic” tradition and his own political/intellectual project. While nuggets from *Common Sense* have been picked up, the radical substance of his arguments has been left to languish much like George Washington left Paine himself to languish in a French prison for ten months. Here, Paine is clearly countering Hobbesian arguments that the state of nature is an antisocial state, and instead insists that the state of nature is a noninstitutionalized space of self-governance and of radical democracy.
- 2 Abraham Lincoln, “A Meditation on Proverbs 25:11” in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Blaser, 9 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4:168.
 - 3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 194. Arendt’s argument picks up on a thread from Aristotle’s *Politics*, which considers the adequacy of defining the polis as a physical space: “It would be possible to surround the whole of the Peloponnese by a single wall [but would that make it a single polis?]” Or, perhaps it is better to define the polis in terms of a much more porous and changing notion of space, a space equivalent to “the dimensions of a people [*ethnos*] rather than those of a city” (*The Politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker [New York: Oxford University Press, 1958], 98–99).
 - 4 Here is an example from the 2000 presidential race. Bill Bradley: “The lifeblood of democracy and politics is trust”; Al Gore: “Democracy stands or falls on a mutual trust” between elected officials and voters (www.billbradley.com/bin/article.pl?path=210799/4; www.algore2000.com/speeches/harvard.html). Bradley proposes specific voting and campaign finance election reform to remedy trust problems, while Gore urges voters to abandon their cynicism about elected officials and/or the United States.
 - 5 Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1995): 69, 72. Samuel R. Delany, an urban queer political theorist, describes a similar affective longing for community but provides a political-economic analysis, one that yields different agendas than Putnam’s antipolitical/sentimental analysis. See Delany’s *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), especially part 2, “. . . Three, Two, One, Contact,” where he outlines his arguments about the difference between networking and contact possibilities in urban democracy.
 - 6 Andrew Carnegie, *Triumphant Democracy, or Fifty Years’ March of the Republic* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1886), iii, 414.
 - 7 But this assumption continues to supply one strong logic for U.S. practices of political representation, and some of our most passionate twentieth-century political theorists from Dewey to Dahl to Rawls seem almost inevitably to fall back on it in their analyses of possibilities for democratic revitalization. See John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927; Chicago: Swallow Press, 1980); Robert Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); and John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
 - 8 Sheldon Wolin, “Contract and Birthright,” in *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the*

- State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 139; Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); and William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
- 9 Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement: Why Moral Conflict Cannot Be Avoided in Politics and What Should Be Done about It* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996).
 - 10 William Corlett, *Community without Unity: A Politics of Derridean Extravagance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
 - 11 Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 10.
 - 12 Corlett, *Community without Unity*, 13, 213.
 - 13 C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 159.
 - 14 Chantal Mouffe, "Preface: Democratic Politics Today" in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1992), 14. In this respect, Ernesto Laclau rightly undercuts the possibility of radical emancipation since an emancipated political order is necessarily tied—if only by way of opposition or priority—to an unfree society. Neither idealist despair nor worldly cynicism should be the fallout of this perspective. Laclau instead takes the impossibility of complete or radical emancipation as symptomatic of democracy. He writes: "Incompletion and provisionality belong to the essence of democracy" (*Emancipation(s)* [New York: Verso, 1996], 16).
 - 15 Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 17.
 - 16 Barbara Cruikshank, *The Will to Empower: Democratic Citizens and Other Subjects* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 2, 5.
 - 17 Bruce Robbins, "Introduction: The Public as Phantom" in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xi.
 - 18 Butler writes: "Although the political discourses that mobilize identity categories tend to cultivate identifications in the service of a political goal, it may be that the persistence of *disidentification* is equally crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation" (*Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* [New York: Routledge, 1993], 4). See also her "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).
 - 19 This is Herbert Marcuse's phrase. He argues that "when truth cannot be realized within the established social order, it always appears . . . as mere utopia. This transcendence speaks not against, but for its truth." Marcuse identifies critical theory as the crucial agent in "utopian" social change: "Critical theory preserves obstinacy as a genuine quality of philosophical thought. . . . From the beginning it did more than simply register and systematize facts. Its impulse came from the force with which it spoke against the facts and confronted bad facticity with its better potentialities" (*Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro [Boston: Beacon Press,

- 1968], 143); thanks to Avery Gordon for drawing our attention to Marcuse, this passage in particular.
- 20 See Lora Romero, “Black Nationalist Housekeeping: Maria W. Stewart” in *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 52–69.
- 21 Nor do the contributors share a disciplinary focus. Through their professional appointments in African American studies, American studies, anthropology, history, English, gender studies, politics, and social theory, the authors represent a variety of disciplines and fields.