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The Democratic In-Between: Storytelling and the Politics of Rupture

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Abstract

This essay rethinks democracy as an encounter that emerges from the margins rather than a system rooted in institutional power. I call this the *democratic in-between*—a space of rupture, presence, and collective appearance. Drawing on Derrida, Anzaldúa, Wolin, and Rancière, and grounded in scenes from prison classrooms and protest encampments, I argue that democracy takes shape not through reform but through interruptions that unsettle the dominant order. Narrative is central to this account. It does not sit outside politics—it makes politics visible. Storytelling brings into view what power seeks to erase, making what institutions refuse to recognize legible. In this sense, narrative becomes a way of doing politics that brings rupture into view, giving it form, voice, and presence.

Keywords

Radical Democracy, Political Rupture, Narrative Theory, Fugitive Politics, Democratic In-Between, Emancipatory Thought

1. Introduction

In the United States, we inhabit a moment of democratic erosion, where institutional legitimacy is eroding and constitutional crises loom on the horizon. At such a critical juncture, I want to redirect our analytic and political gaze, even if only for a fleeting moment. Democracy does not merely deteriorate at the margins; it originates there. And the stories that emerge from these spaces—testimonies, refusals, songs, chants—are not merely reflective of marginality; they constitute a never-settled political grammar. These are not just stories. They are scenes of what I call the *democratic in-between*—a space of ethical encounter where presence interrupts the order of things.

From the outset, I want to foreground narrative not as a rhetorical gesture, but as a method for theorizing democracy from the margins of an allegedly democratic society (Naumes, 2015: pp. 820-832).[1] Narrative exposes how power choreographs invisibility and exclusion, and how those rendered inexistent enact their political, ethical, and cultural sensibilities through embodied and relational forms of storytelling.[2]

What I offer here is an opening for rethinking what it means to deploy the political currency of the concept of democracy in a time of deep despair and fear, especially among those consigned to the margins of unacceptability by the current administration. We must refuse the performative theatrics of proclaiming the superiority of American democracy, particularly now that the dramaturgical spectacle of its illusion has run its course. Instead, we must abandon the empty promises of systematic democracy, especially those joined to procedural liberalism. This requires us to eschew the idea of democracy as an institutional form in need of deepening or rehabilitation, and instead, reconceive it as an event that materializes in moments of relational rupture. Such a view engenders a radical proposition: a denial of democracy as a system of governance, and instead, its refiguration as a series of existential openings—fragile, ontological events that occur when the underside of the political narrates itself.[3]

What I call the *democratic in-between* names a space of political emergence that arises outside institutional structures and against the order of dominant visibility. It is not a transitional stage or a preparatory site, but a condition of rupture—where those rendered uncounted appear, act, and narrate themselves into being. Neither wholly inside nor entirely excluded, the democratic in-between is the unsettled terrain where politics becomes possible through presence, storytelling, and refusal. It is from this space that democracy, understood not as a system but as an encounter, comes into view.

This essay draws on scenes I have witnessed firsthand in prison classrooms and from protest actions that have unfolded in public spaces, continuing to evolve in the present. The prison vignettes stem from my experiences teaching political theory within two California state prisons. They are not presented as exceptional or symbolic but as concrete moments that show how political life asserts itself where it is least expected. The protest examples—from student encampments to labor strikes and mutual aid efforts—are not meant to be exhaustive. They are remain-

[1]Sarah Naumes argues that the narrative turn challenges dominant epistemological and methodological boundaries of political subjectivity, forging space for articulations of lived experience.

[2]For the efficacy and power of storytelling, see (Moulin, 2016: pp. 136-152; Inayatullah, 2011: pp. 1-18; Dauphinee, 2010: pp. 799-818; Caivano & Naumes, 2021).

[3]This use of the term underside draws from Gustavo Gutiérrez's work on liberation theology, where he calls for a praxis that emerges from the margins of history. While his framing is rooted in Christian tradition, I retain the epistemological force of the term to rethink democracy beyond institutional form. I use underside to mark those who have been denied existence by dominant structures of power. It names the poor, the unhoused, the sick, the Indigenous, the neglected—not as a fixed social category but as a political condition. Their emergence from the margins is not symbolic. It is the materialization of a democratic rupture. See (Gutiérrez, 1973).

ders. Each one points to how presence, rupture, and collective refusal give shape to what I call the *democratic in-between*. These scenes are still emerging—from solidarity actions in support of Gaza to coordinated protests against ICE raids and the June 2025 federalization of the California National Guard and deployment of Marines to Los Angeles, authorized by President Trump.

2. The Democratic In-Between

In previous work with Martin Breaugh, we theorized a framework for centering emancipatory politics in what we call a "living critique of domination" (Breaugh & Caivano, 2024: pp. 447-472). This was offered as a mode of political practice that does not operate from a place of abstraction or detachment, but emerges from within and against structures of power as embodied, affective, and collective rupture. The *democratic in-between*, in this light, is not a periphery to be folded into the center, but a generative ground. In this scene, those rendered nonexistent in the dominant order interrupt the political imagination and assert their presence. It is from this underside that something new becomes possible: beyond reform, *contra* assimilation—a rupture.

The *democratic in-between* is not a fixed location or a performance—it is a condition of possibility. It is the scene in which the illegible interrupt their erasure. Alain Badiou reminds us that the event fractures the existing world by revealing what it could not previously register (Badiou, 2009: p. 369). That fracture reflects the *democratic in-between*—a disruption that opens up new ways of seeing and acting beyond what the current order can contain. Gloria Anzaldúa offers the borderlands as a site of ontological tension and relational excess, where, in her words, "the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (Anzaldúa, 1987). That intimacy is not just affective—it is insurgent. It defies borders, dissolves separations, and unsettles categories. This is not a metaphor. It's a space of in-between life, where contradiction becomes a creative force. That space speaks directly to the *democratic in-between* as a site where something uncounted becomes real. Sheldon Wolin calls this kind of democratic appearance fugitive. Democracy, for Wolin, is not a regime or an institutional norm but a fugitive eruption that evades capture (Wolin, 1994: pp. 11-25). And, in doing so, democratic action interrupts, insists, yet always disappears. But what is constituted is an emergence of the political into view. Jacques Rancière adds that politics begins precisely when those without a part—the excluded, the uncounted—declare their equality without asking for permission (Rancière, 2007: p. 61). That moment, when presence breaks the regime of the present, is precisely where the *democratic in-between* lives, not in procedures, but in the appearance of those meant to be absent. These insights come together: the in-between is not a preparatory space for democratic inclusion, nor a training ground for civic literacy. It is the instantiation of democracy.

If this sounds abstract, it is not. I have witnessed this in practice. In my classrooms with incarcerated students, where legal protections are speculative and so-

cial recognition is antisocial, students engage with each other across intersecting, and at times antagonistic, lines of identity to rewrite a collective political imaginary. These are not moments of empowerment in the liberal sense. They are interruptions—intellectual ruptures that refuse the logics of carceral containment. To speak, to think, to read together under conditions of legally sanctioned slavery, the denial of human rights, and the erasure of the personal are not merely pedagogical—they are political.

We see these moments elsewhere, too. In the murals painted after the murder of George Floyd.[4] In the bodily refusal of protest—in the encampments erected on university campuses in spring 2024 in solidarity with Gaza, in the youth-led climate strikes disrupting daily flows of capital, and in the occupation of public land by unhoused communities asserting their right to remain.[5] In labor walkouts like the UAW strike, in campus-wide student boycotts, in the coordinated shutdowns of ICE facilities.[6] In mutual aid networks formed in the aftermath of natural disasters, police violence, and pandemics—networks that do not wait for permission, but enact care as an ontological necessity. These are not symbolic actions. They are scenes of political communion—corporeal, collective, and dissensual. They do not demand recognition. They assert it. And in doing so, they fracture the seamless operation of democratic institutions that pretend to speak for all while legislating exclusion and further sanctioning state violence.

3. Remainders, Not Reforms

To take democracy seriously is to understand that it is not a form but a force. It is not defined by architectural permanence, but by its capacity to constitute and reconstitute from a multiplicity of subjectivities. Derrida writes that democracy is always to come, not as a future destination, but as a promise that unsettles the present Derrida (2005: p. 37). The *democratic in-between* is that unsettling. It is the foundational space from which a different political logic erupts.

As Foucault reminds us, state institutions—schools, prisons, electoral mechanisms, to name just a few—are not neutral domains Foucault (1995: pp. 138-169). They are apparatuses through which political legibility is rendered or withheld, sorting, acknowledging, and denying identities. In doing so, the institution enacts a form of violence that enforces silencing, both in utterance and in denying that the speaker has any claim to speak at all. The in-between appears when these mechanisms of silence and existential denial are exposed and interrupted. When those who have been cast out of the political sphere insert themselves into its center, not in the name of inclusion, but in the name of transformation. As Badiou insists, the event does not affirm the structure, institution, or policy

[4]For analyses of the discursive site and its capacity to evoke narrative through muralism, graffiti, and street writing in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, see Cappelli (2020: pp. 1-25); Simmons (2023: pp. 205-217) and Hemmerich (2021: pp. 25-31).

[5]For brief but compelling sketches of democratic ruptures in protest movements, see Smith & Wilson (2024: pp. 50-66); Hodali (2024); Tafon & Saunders (2025); Gorman (2021).

[6]For an additional example of democratic moments, see Rutherford (2024: pp. 220-226).

Badiou (2012). It subtracts from it. And to circle back to Derrida's claim that democracy is always a democracy to come reminds us that the *telos* of democratic participation is not reformism, but *remainder*. It is what is left behind that cannot yet be realized in the present moment.[7]

This is most unmistakable in sites of critical pedagogy. In classrooms shaped by abandonment or violence, the act of study can become insurgent—a form of ontological resistance. Here, education is not the transmission of content in alignment with the gospel of neoliberal economization but the disordering of knowledge. It is the practice of creating space where none existed previously. Outside the classroom, it can emerge, albeit ephemerally, in projects of mutual aid and land reclamation. These examples reconstitute political subjectivity, erecting a life in common that refuses capture—a democratic community to come.

4. Five Remainders

In earlier work, I proposed a set of five remainders—not residues of past movements nor aspirations for future institutional capture, but recurring practices that persist despite governance, often at the edges of legibility and outside the parameters of formalist modes of recognition (Caivano, 2024). What I offer here is a rearticulation of those remainders, now situated more explicitly within the framework of the *democratic in-between*. Each remainder, when taken seriously, marks a departure from familiar vocabularies of radical democracy—not by negating their contributions, but by reorienting attention toward forms of action that do not seek reform or assimilation, but instead disclose a fugitive and often provisional sense of presence.

First, insurgent public space(s) are created through reappropriating time, language, and presence. We saw this vividly in the student encampments that appeared on college campuses across the United States in spring 2024, organized in solidarity with Gaza. These were not performances of dissent within an accepted neoliberal framework. They did not seek permission to speak or platforms from which to make claims. Instead, they transformed university space into something unrecognizable to the institution itself—a space of refusal, mutual care, study, and action (Rosen & Entin, 2024). In contrast to agonistic models of the public sphere that presume a ground for engagement or contestation, these encampments produced something else entirely: a refusal to participate in the given order, and an insistence on the immediacy of presence.

Second, a rejection of codified laws that elevate sovereignty over self-governance in favor of the renewal of principles rooted in shared, lived experience. Following severe flooding in Eastern Kentucky in early 2025, a series of mutual aid

[7]Although both Derrida's *democracy to come* and Badiou's *event* stage politics as a break with the present, they carry distinct temporal and ontological commitments. Derrida offers a promise—always deferred, never fulfilled—while Badiou names an irruption that forces a fidelity to something wholly new. I draw from both not to collapse them, but to hold open the tension between the anticipated and the emergent. The *democratic in-between* does not resolve this tension, rather it names a politics that is both not-yet and already-happening, fractured and unfolding in ways that resist full capture.

efforts mobilized rapidly, not in response to state directives or NGO coordination, but through long-standing networks of community trust and mutual support.[8] These efforts bypassed legal and institutional channels. Instead, they enacted a different kind of political logic—one that does not appeal to sovereignty for protection or legitimacy but instead generates authority through care, immediacy, and interdependence. Unlike prefigurative politics that often aim to model alternative futures within the present, this remainder animates from an urgency of the now, and in doing so, it renders the state both irrelevant and devastatingly illegitimate.

Third, it posits the political subject as relational, rather than autonomous, and constituted through provisional and collective means. In the prison classroom, I have seen students engage one another across vast differences of race, gender, experience, and political affiliation, without the performative demand of consensus or ideological alignment. These classrooms, shaped by the logics of captivity and surveillance, nonetheless become sites where something irreducibly political occurs: neither deliberation nor liberal empowerment, but a moment of identification that something shared can emerge without needing to be resolved.[9] This stands in contrast to the deliberative traditions of radical democracy, which often seek to clarify positions or construct communicative foundations. What emerges here is not clarity, but contradiction—and it is precisely in that contradiction that politics appears.

Fourth, a disruption of the state's impulse toward uniformity, asserting difference as a condition of political vitality. During the 2023 UAW strike, a wave of cross-union solidarity emerged, encompassing graduate workers, delivery drivers, and logistics staff—groups traditionally viewed as peripheral to the automotive labor struggle (Lichtenstein, 2024: pp. 48-55). This convergence was not the product of an identity-based coalition or a strategic alliance. It was unruly, improvised, and partial. And yet, it pointed toward a kind of dis-identificatory politics that refuses to collapse multiplicity into unity. Whereas much of radical democratic theory continues to hold out the promise of pluralism as a horizon for democratic renewal, this remainder suggests something different: that difference itself, when uncontained, generates rupture rather than deliberation.

Fifth, and finally, an intimacy at the margins, from the underside, within the encampments of the unhoused, in abandoned lots, under overpasses, through horizontal, autonomous networks that resist capture and refigure the terrain of the possible. Across cities like Philadelphia and Oakland, unhoused communities have developed networks of harm reduction, communal defense, and collective subsistence that do not seek policy change or municipal support.[10] These are not failures of the political, nor are they utopian experiments. They are real, situated

[8]See Central Appalachian Family Farm Fund (2025), this program supported family farms across southeastern Kentucky following the February 2025 floods, offering direct grants for recovery efforts. https://www.appalachianky.org/flood/.

[9]For further exploration of pedagogical rupture in prison education, see Caivano (2025: pp. 167-174).

[10]For an ethnographic reflection on informal placemaking among unhoused communities, see Douglas (2023: pp. 35-56).

forms of political life—messy, fragile, often unsustainable—and yet they persist. In contrast to normative visions of democratic participation that emphasize inclusion or visibility, this remainder insists on the right to exist without being seen, to act without being counted, and to refuse without being translated.

Taken together, these five remainders do not offer a program for institutional renewal, nor are they meant to typologize what is to come, or suggest a call to recover a more authentic version of democracy. They do not look back nostalgically, nor do they point forward with certainty. Instead, they insist that even in the absence of structure or recognition, something remains. That remainder, provisional, relational, and embodied, is what I call the *democratic in-between*.

What ties these five remainders together is not strategy or coherence. It's the fact that each arises from conditions where the standard avenues of participation have already failed. These are not scenes waiting to be folded back into institutional reform. They endure precisely because something *was* fractured—and because within that break, something else became possible. To name rupture as central is not to reject institutional or deliberative accounts of democracy outright. There is value in the work of thinkers such as Iris Marion Young, Seyla Benhabib, or Jürgen Habermas, who have envisioned democracy as a space for communication, mutual justification, and ethical repair. But these frameworks rest on a critical assumption: that one can be heard, that one's existence can be translated into the terms the *system recognizes*. The remainders are the consequence of systematic exclusion, marginalization, and violence.

The student encampments didn't make claims to be deliberative. The mutual aid networks in Eastern Kentucky didn't seek political endorsement. The prison classroom didn't produce rational consensus. These aren't examples of failed deliberation. They are reminders that, for many, deliberation was never extended in the first place. I stress rupture, over reform, because it is what *remains* when reform is structurally foreclosed. The *democratic in-between* dwells in that space, not as an ideal, but as a practice that emerges from the very conditions it challenges.

If rupture is how political presence becomes possible, then narrative is how that presence is held, carried, and shared. Narrative—especially when rooted in embodied and autoethnographic practice—is not something added on afterward. It does not come later to explain. It is already doing the work. It gives shape to what power would rather leave unspoken, and it carries with it the ethical weight of having appeared at all.[11] Stories from remaindered spaces are not accounts of politics—*they are politics*. They intervene in what counts as knowledge, in who gets to be named as a subject, and in how we understand what democracy can feel like at the margins.

As violent state actions become more ubiquitous and more visible at the center of political discourse—from deportations to the demonization of the LGBTQIA+ community—the idea of democracy contains no singular panacea. But I affirm storytelling as a political practice that carries an ethical charge within the demo-

[11]For the emergence of the in-between through collective writing, see Behl (2018: pp. 30-44).

cratic encounter. It brings with it the possibility of relationality by reducing the space between us. It enacts the very intimacy Anzaldúa describes and renders the in-between audible, affective, and authentic. Stories do not merely supplement the political; they are constitutive of it.

5. Conclusion

To dwell in the in-between is not to be disoriented, but to engage the world otherwise. It is to insist that democracy is not a destination, but a disruption—felt in the ethical coming together of you and I. Not a perfected form, but an opening that is never entirely foreclosed. What emerges from the underside must not be reabsorbed but narrated—as rupture, as presence, as the very condition of political possibility. The in-between is not a space we step into—it is what democracy becomes when the uncounted appear. In this sense, democracy is not a form to be recovered but a rupture to be enacted—an insurgent practice of presence against the erasures of power.

If the *democratic in-between* is not a place but a practice, then the task is not to arrive at it but to recognize when it happens—*and to be with it*, *in it*. This means rethinking what constitutes political action and how we come to understand it. Rather than asking who holds power or which reforms are feasible, we might ask: where does presence break through? What remains after the system fails to deliver? In organizing, pedagogy, and research, this theory invites us to attend to the margins not as sites of lack but as spaces *of* political life. To be with and in a prison classroom, to witness students name themselves beyond their number, is not ancillary to politics—*it is politics*. Yet, no formula is offered. Yet, being in-between provides an ethical invitation to move with rupture, to carry stories that are not supposed to be told, and to remain attuned to the fragile and eruptive life of democracy, even *when* and *where* it is least expected.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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