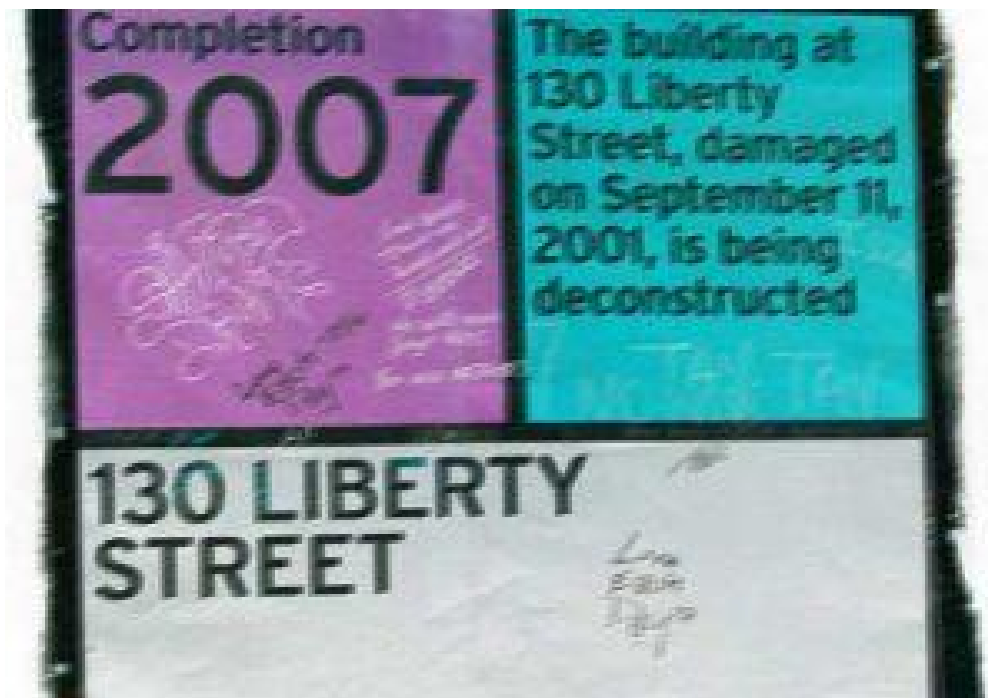


2008 Vol 8 Issue No. 1 — Democracy Under Fire

> EDITORIAL

This issue of Transformations concerns the idea of democracy and its uses and abuses in various contexts of public debate and analysis. Democracy is always more than an idea expressing the core values of liberty, equality and fraternity. It is also a discursive concept: a product of the way meaning is circulated, practiced, structured and embodied in human action and thought. Democracy is, if you like, a rhetorical figure in a broader set of strategies related to power and its capacity to organize, maintain and reproduce belief systems. As such, democracy is both an ideal held forth as something towards which we should aim or which we should defend, and at the same time, a signifier in a strategy of power in which the stakes are always reducible to sectional interests of various kinds.



It is the view of this journal that democracy is not an already completed task, but an ongoing project requiring constant critical engagement across wide social and cultural fields, especially in the field of education where democratic principles should be foundational for

the curriculum. Democracy can only work as democracy in a climate of critique and rigorous debate, against the tendency in institutions of power towards dogmatism and ideological closure. All of the articles in this issue of Transformations engage critically with the ideological closure of meaning that inhabits institutions and discourses, especially the media. They expose democracy and its associated ideas to its own discursive strategies, thereby making it available for refiguring and redeployment.

The lead article, by Niall Lucy and Steve Mickler, entitled "The War on English: An Answer to the Question, What is Postmodernism?" takes up the debate in Australia around the issue of "critical literacy" as a strategy in the teaching of English in secondary schools, and exposes the misreadings associated with the word "postmodernism" by conservative commentators, especially as a catchword for cultural relativism. Lucy and Mickler expose these misreadings as attempts to portray critical literacy as an enemy of democracy. Upholding Enlightenment values and the spirit of critique first proposed by Kant, Lucy and Mickler engage in a counter-attack by arguing that "If it is 'postmodern' to ask after the conditions under which the meaning of a text might be said to occur, it is therefore also democratic to do so."

The article by Elaine Kelly, entitled "Democratic Hospitalities: national borders and the impossibility of the other for democracy" examines the politics of hospitality related to the immigration debate in Australia, and the controversies surrounding the previous Liberal coalition government led by John Howard in its handling of asylum seekers. Kelly invokes Jacques Derrida's and Giorgio Agamben's work on the logic of democracy as an aporia in Western discourse, requiring careful unpacking and exposure to critique. Terry Eysen's article entitled "Democracy of the Civil Dead: The Blind Trade in Citizenship" critiques the idea of the citizen in democracy as a subjectivity bound to the contractual logic of exchange. Drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida, he develops an alternative concept of the "denizen" as an exposure "which opens up the state to contestation and the possibility of a democracy worth its name." In her article entitled "Judith Butler, Gender, Radical Democracy: What's Lacking?," Julie MacKenzie critiques Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in terms of radical democracy proposed by Chantal Mouffe and others. Defending Butler against the charge of linguistic idealism, she argues that Butler's theory of performativity offers a materialist account of democracy in terms of singular, contingent iterations.

In "Democracy Now! Decolonising US News Media," Kevin Howley describes the practices of non-commercial public radio broadcasting in the USA, in particular, the Democracy Now! radio station and its agenda to provide a space for independent critical comment on political issues, and promote participatory democracy in the face of the all encompassing corporate-state nexus of media power. In a similar vein, Henk Huijser and Janine Little, in

their article entitled "GetUp! for what? Issues Driven Democracy in a Transforming Public Sphere," examine the Australian on-line media outlet GetUp!, its impact on the recent Australian federal elections, and its potential to help drive participatory democracy in the public sphere. Ben Isakhan's article entitled "Oriental Despotism" and the Democratisation of Iraq in The Australian" is concerned with the way democratic ideas are used in the mainstream Australian press, in this case, the figure of the oriental despot, as a way of characterizing debates about Islam and terrorism and its framing in Orientalist discourse.

Niall Lucy & Steve Mickler

The War on English: An Answer to the Question, What is Postmodernism?

> Abstract

Attacks on English teaching and English teachers are widespread in the Australian public sphere today, centred usually on disparaging claims about something called "postmodernism." In political terms, these attacks are mounted just as often from the left as from the right; hence they would seem to be based on sound universal principles, having nothing to do with politics. In this way "postmodernism" is made to seem "anti-commonsensical" or "ideological," as we argue here by way of a discussion of Kevin Donnelly's *Dumbing Down*. For us, though, "postmodernism" represents a continuation (by other means) of the Enlightenment's commitment to critical thought on behalf of an idea of democracy, such that the war on "postmodern" English is consistent with conservative forms of opposition to that idea.

Elaine Kelly

Democratic Hospitalities: national borders and the impossibility of the other for democracy

> Abstract

This paper is interested in looking at the similarities and differences in the work of Agamben and Derrida. Agamben's work on sovereign power and "bare life" has been taken up extensively in critical theory as a way of understanding the on-going violence of state-centric "liberal democratic" regimes of government. Here, I endeavor to draw out the implications of Agamben's theory for understandings of democracy and hospitality. Following this, I compare such ideas with the deconstructive approach advanced by Derrida. Derrida's writings offer a far more complex and aporetic understanding of hospitality, which insist on the unknown and the unforeseeable, as well as a conception of equality irreducible to calculation or numbers. In *Rogues*, Derrida poses the following question: "does this measure of the immeasurable, this democratic equality, end at citizenship, and thus at the borders of the nation-state? Or should we extend it to . . . the whole world of humans assumed to be like me . . . ?" (53) This essay will attempt to engage with this vital question via a theoretical

exploration of Derrida's work on "democracy" and "hospitality". A series of questions motivate my analysis: how do democracy and hospitality operate together conceptually? How can Derrida's works intervene in debates about asylum seekers, refugees and immigration in Australia? How can we give something back to a hospitality and democracy that has been hijacked by neo-liberal, neo-conservative agendas and discourse?

Terry Eyssens

Democracy of the Civil Dead: The Blind Trade in Citizenship

> Abstract

Liberal democratic citizenship has mutated into a 'blind trade' with a trajectory towards civil death, under which, in the name of democracy, citizens are expected to relinquish more rights and participatory possibilities in return for unguaranteed security, spectacles, and unspecified political, and economic 'goods' and 'protections'. 'Civil death', the legislative deprivation of civil rights, is spreading beyond the bounds of contractarian logic and into the rights of (non-criminal) citizens. It is conceivable that citizens will find themselves without any meaningful political and civil rights, inhabiting a 'democracy of the civil dead'. Rather than attempting to refine or redefine the contractarian approach or, to return to a classical Greek model of democracy, this paper draws on Agamben, Arendt, Nancy and Derrida in order to pose the possibility of the presence of 'denizens' who, in rejecting citizenship and the enclosure of rights and obligations inscribed in it, take up an overtly political position of *exposure* which opens up the state to contestation and the possibility of a democracy worthy of the name.

Julie MacKenzie

Judith Butler, Gender, Radical Democracy: What's Lacking?

> Abstract

While Judith Butler may be recognised foremost as a theorist of gender, this paper seeks to chart the status of democracy in her work. Butler's work on gender is firmly located within a "radical democratic" politics, and it is in the name of a notion of radical democracy that Butler's work proceeds. This paper, then, critically interrogates the nexus of gender and democratic politics in Butler's work.

This paper is in two parts. The first takes issue with Butler's account of the relationship of gender and materiality. Butler rejects any appeal to the pre-discursive status of sexual difference. Instead, configuration of power relations, a *particular* representation of the outside to discourse becomes reified *as* material, natural, prediscursive. And her answer to this question is, famously, her performativity thesis, her argument that matter should be

seen as the product of “a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter” (26). This approach explains her understanding of what is denoted by “sex”: it comes to appear natural, material, only as an effect of reiterative practices.

This rendering of the relationship of matter to discourse, I contend, serves to entrench a radical disjunction between them. Rather than refiguring ontology as itself forceful, dynamic and wholly political, she reasserts the primacy of the discursive against the material, and treats the realm of signification, because variable, contestable and dynamic, as the proper locus of the political.

The second part of the paper suggests that the problems with Butler’s account of the relationship of gender and materiality persist in her strategy for radical democratic transformation. For Butler, what acts as the motor of political futurity is that any attempt to describe the pre-discursive “reality” of a particular situation will not be a “true” account, but rather a contingent articulation generated from within the realm of discourse. The contingency and futurity of the political is guaranteed by the referent’s insistent demand to be represented, and the fact that this demand is always responded to imperfectly. What results is that any rendering of the contents of the outside to signification is generated from *within* signification. Because never fully representational, signification is engaged in an endless process of reiteration that, over time, gains the appearance of ontological reality. It is in the possibility of articulating this process differently that Butler locates the potential for radical democracy.

The paper gestures towards a more radical refiguring of the relationship between matter and the political than Butler’s work allows, suggesting that we must instead acknowledge that matter itself is variable, and that democratic politics, far from being based upon the inevitable absence of the ontological from signification, is an eminently material transformation.

Kevin Howley

[Democracy Now! Decolonising US News Media](#)

> Abstract

U.S. news media has been colonized, captured within the nexus of corporate and state power that characterizes modern imperialism. Abdicating its historic role as a watchdog of the powerful, seemingly incapable of ferreting out truth from lies, and unwilling to provide a robust and inclusive forum for public debate, contemporary American journalism is in a profound state of crisis (McChesney, 2004). This paper considers the role an emerging

independent media sector has played in revitalizing American journalistic form and practice. Specifically, this essay examines Democracy Now! – a daily news program that challenges the hegemony of corporate news media.

Following a concise overview of recent failures of the corporate press, from reporting during the lead up to the US-led invasion of Iraq to the silencing of dissident voices at home and abroad, this paper proceeds with an analysis of the journalistic philosophy and news routines employed by Democracy Now! Here, I place special emphasis on participatory journalism and the innovative uses of technology that contribute to the success of Democracy Now! The essay concludes with some thoughts on the part Democracy Now! plays in promoting participatory democracy, amplifying voices of dissent, and legitimating an oppositional stance toward American neo-imperialism.

Keywords: corporate press, independent media, media convergence, participatory journalism, neo-imperialism

Henk Huijser & Janine Little

[GetUp! for what? Issues Driven Democracy in a Transforming Public Sphere](#)

> Abstract

This paper looks at the Australian online activists' site *GetUp!* as a case study in consideration of democracy as an idea that is in Derrida's terms 'yet to arrive'. In the specific Australian context of the lead-up to the 2007 Federal Election, we explore the impact and popularity of *GetUp!* as at once a consequence of media fragmentation and a disintegrating public sphere, and a driver of a new form of democracy that might be called 'issues-based', rather than dependent on membership of, and loyalty to, traditional political parties. By first outlining some key theoretical currents in discussion of new media, and the general interrelationship between media and democracy, the paper views through *GetUp!* the ways in which subversion and renegotiation of power affect transformation of the ideal of the public sphere.

Benjamin Isakhan

["Oriental Despotism" and the Democratisation of Iraq in The Australian](#)

> Abstract

While much recent scholarship has extended Said's critique of Orientalism to the portrayal of people of Middle Eastern descent or of the Islamic faith in the Australian news media, little attention has been paid to the ways in which these same organs utilise Orientalist clichés in their reports on democratic developments in the Middle East. This paper seeks to address this lacuna by examining the Australian news media's coverage of the series of democratic

elections and the national referendum held in Iraq during 2005. Focusing specifically on *The Australian* newspaper, this article finds that much of the debate and discussion of Iraq's democratisation has been underpinned by the discourse of "Oriental despotism" and is subsequently premised on the assumption that the Western world is the legitimate legatee of democracy and therefore reserves the right to democratise – *under fire* if necessary – the backward, barbaric and despotic Middle Eastern "other".