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# Imagining “Sensate Democracy”: Beyond Republicanism, Liberalism, and the Literary

Shelley Streeby\*

In her 2015 book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler emphasizes the disjunction between the political form of democracy and the principle of popular sovereignty. It is important to keep them apart, she insists, in order to understand how “expressions of the popular will can call into question a particular political form,” thereby creating flashpoints in which “political orders deemed democratic are brought into crisis by an assembled or orchestrated collective that claims to be the popular will” (2). Although Butler focuses on the present and recent past, she ranges backward and forward in time, exploring and connecting recurrent tensions in democratic theory. For “the issue is at once ancient and timely,” she reminds us. In the wake of the eighteenth-century revolutions, Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and other early theorists of democracy worried over “whether democratic state structures could survive unbridled expressions of popular sovereignty”; they “feared ‘the mob’” even as they affirmed the significance of “expressions of the popular will” (1). In an introduction and six chapters based on the Mary Flexner lectures she delivered at Bryn Mawr as well as other recent talks, Butler makes an important contribution to debates over democracy and popular sovereignty by theorizing how “acting in concert can be an embodied form of

*Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler. Harvard University Press, 2015.

*Fictions of Mass Democracy in Nineteenth-Century America*, Stacey Margolis. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

*Commons Democracy: Reading the Politics of Participation in the Early United States*, Dana D. Nelson. Fordham University Press, 2016.

*Divided Sovereignties: Race, Nationhood, and Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century America*, Rochelle Raineri Zuck. University of Georgia Press, 2016.

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*Butler makes an important contribution to debates over democracy and popular sovereignty by theorizing how "acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political" (9).*

calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political" (9). To that end, she centers the collective, performative dimensions of political struggles and the bodily acts that animate social movements. Calling attention to how today many demonstrations and movements "take precarity as their galvanizing condition" precisely through "the social modality of the body (9, 153), Butler provocatively suggests that the "republican ideal is yet to give way to a broader understanding of sensate democracy" (207).

Three recent books in American literary studies also address this disjunction between popular sovereignty and the political form of democracy and speculate on the connections between late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century tensions in democratic theory and the present. They all diverge from Butler, however, in privileging literature, variously understood, as illuminating other ways of thinking about these tensions and connections. In *Fictions of Mass Democracy in Nineteenth-Century America* (2015), Stacey Margolis suggests that what she calls nineteenth-century "network fictions" experiment with ideas about how "the public is organized not only by explicitly political discourse" but also by "diffuse, informal, and largely disorganized social networks" (2). She considers her book "a prehistory of our networked age, in which political participation has been expanded and transformed by the rise of a digital public sphere" (1–2), though she does not see this as something to be celebrated and foregrounds fiction that expresses anxieties about it. In *Commons Democracy: Reading the Politics of Participation in the Early United States* (2016), Dana D. Nelson uses the political novels of the early nation to argue for the significance of what she calls "vernacular" or "commons democracy," which she claims "presents some interesting alternatives to its companion and competitor, liberal democracy" (9). Indeed, she argues that the commons is "a better lens for this part of history than contending notions of representation, or republicanism and liberalism" (22). Nelson, too, links this early Anglo-American literary history to our present and the "modern commons, enabled by an Internet," but makes a more forceful case for its contributions to the "vitality . . . of collective, local practices of democratic power, the power of what theorists then and today call 'the multitude': local self-constituting societies not organized by or subordinated to the nation-state" (3, 14). Finally, in *Divided Sovereignties: Race, Nation, and Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century America* (2016), Rochelle Zuck centers the concept of "politically divided sovereignty—either in the form of two sovereign powers vying for control of the same territory or in the kind of divisions involved in the federal system created by America's founders" (2). She suggests that throughout the nineteenth century "the phrases

*imperium in imperio, nation within a nation, and divided sovereignty*” were used “fluidly and, at times, interchangeably” in a wide range of literature broadly conceived, phrases which were “central to engagements between the United States and Cherokees, African Americans, and particular immigrant groups, specifically the Irish and Chinese, engagements that informed the development of American ideas of sovereignty, nationhood, and collective allegiance” (3).

The archive for each of these investigations of tensions in democratic theory significantly shapes the possibilities and limits each scholar sees when connecting the past to the present. Butler is an interdisciplinary political theorist who is thinking here in creative and original ways about how a “social movement is itself a social form” (218). The book’s origins were inspired by events at Tahrir Square in the winter of 2010, which renewed interest in the “form and effect of public assemblies” (1). Butler also takes up, among other causes, the collective chant of restraint that arose in the first 2009 Egyptian revolution (90); the Arab Spring; the Occupy movement; antiprecarity demonstrations around the world; Black Lives Matter and protests over policing in Ferguson, Missouri; anticolonial movements of Palestinians, including queers, in Gaza; the animal rights movement; mass demonstrations by the undocumented, including one in 2006 in which undocumented Mexican workers sang the US national anthem in Spanish (49); and public education movements in the US and Chile. While Butler briefly considers “right-wing demonstrations” (124), this is not a major focus, even if she trenchantly analyzes the necropolitics of the Tea Party, commenting on the “shout of joy” that arose at a gathering where Ron Paul declared that “those who have serious illness and cannot pay for health insurance or ‘choose’ not to pay” will “simply have to die” (12). Seeking to understand the economic and political conditions that inform such sentiments, Butler starts “with the presupposition that something has gone very wrong” when “the idea of the death of an impoverished or uninsured person elicits shouts of joy from a proponent of Tea Party republicanism, a nationalist variant of economic libertarianism that has fully eclipsed any sense of a common social responsibility with a colder and more calculating metric aided and abetted, it seems, by a rather joyous relation to cruelty” (13–14).

In contrast, Butler focuses on the body as connecting across experiences of precarity, in speculating on “alliances that assemble across differences” (122). She argues for the significance of media images (91), especially “globalizing media” in which “the local must be recast outside itself in order to be established as local” (92). She also considers how the use of technology implicates the body in media that is “hand-held” and cell phones that are “held high” (94),

where "the activation of the instrument is part of the bodily action itself" (93). Butler asks us not to lose sight of how a "risk is run precisely by those bodies on the street": "holding the camera or the cell phone, face-to-face with those they oppose," and of how the latter often attack cameras and media instruments (92). Most significantly, perhaps, she emphasizes the power of a plural performativity that involves "not only speech, but the demands of bodily action, gesture, movement, congregation, persistence, and exposure to possible violence" (75). Asking hard questions about why "verbalization remains the norm for thinking about expressive political action" (18), Butler concludes that "however important words are for such a stand, they do not exhaust the political importance of plural and embodied action" (19). Butler's focus on bodies thereby foregrounds material questions of difference (race, gender, sexuality, ability, citizenship) that can be obscured by critical frameworks that give words more weight.

In the three other studies of the disjunction between the political form of democracy and popular sovereignty, all of the authors privilege literature as a lens, but they vary in their interest in connecting that literature to movements and other collectivities. Margolis's archive is the canonical fiction of Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Fanny Fern, Harriet Jacobs, and James Fenimore Cooper. The book jacket tells us that this study "departs from recent scholarship which emphasizes the responsibilities of citizenship and the achievements of oppositional social movements," arguing instead "that fiction, in its freedom to represent what resists representation, develops the most groundbreaking theories of the democratic public" ("Fictions"). Those theories, Margolis claims, are "thought experiments on the new democratic reality" (20) in which authors offer "formal correlatives for the democratic public" as they struggle to "visualize . . . ephemeral social networks" (2) that are "not organized . . . by any political movement or figure of collectivity" (21). Nelson also focuses mostly on canonical early Anglo-American fiction, but she is definitely interested in collectivities insofar as she asks us to take political novels' "arguments about commoning practices seriously" (14), suggesting that we can thereby access "the alternative democratic practices and cultures of ordinary citizens" through literary texts as well as sources "only just now being studied at the micro-level by a new generation of historians" (22). Even though the authors were almost always from "elite families," Nelson argues that the political literature of Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Robert Montgomery Bird, William Gilmore Simms, Caroline Kirkland, and Cooper offers a "good glimpse" of the lives and practices of "ordinary people." That vision is difficult

to access otherwise, she claims, since “[t]he archive for studying their lives is thin” (12), so much so that “we can sometimes get a fuller sense of the humanity of these ordinary actors” from “fictional portraits of common folk” than from historical records (13).<sup>1</sup>

Of the three, Zuck defines the literary most expansively, in keeping with a broader republican understanding of literature as a field of public documents and writing that is wider than the subset of fiction, poetry, and plays. Instead of focusing on canonical literature, she thus explores the genre of the written constitution by turning to a “range of civic founders who were framed as threats to American political culture and sought to use written constitutions as a means of gaining situated political advantage and reimagining their collective relationship to the United States” (8).

For Butler, collectivities are of primary importance in thinking about popular sovereignty and alternatives to republican, liberal, and neoliberal democracy. She clarifies that the “plural enactments” she analyzes “make manifest the understanding that a situation is shared, contesting the individualizing morality that makes a moral norm of economic self-sufficiency” when the latter is “increasingly unrealizable” (18). Throughout, she pursues the possibility of “taking apart that individualizing and maddening form of responsibility in favor of an ethos of solidarity that would affirm mutual dependency, dependency on workable infrastructures and social networks, and open the way to a form of improvisation in the course of devising collective and institutional ways of addressing induced precarity” (21–22).<sup>2</sup> She insists that human dependency “gives rise to the very capacity for action” and that “our persistence as living organisms depends on that matrix of sustaining interdependent relations” (44, 86). What is more, when bodies act together, she theorizes, “[n]o one body establishes the space of appearance” for this action; this performative exercise happens only between bodies. Butler therefore asks us to consider how “action emerges from the ‘between,’ a spatial figure for a relation that both binds and differentiates” (77). She further clarifies that “action in alliance happens precisely between those who participate,” where that interval is “the space of sociality and of support, of being constituted in a sociality that is never reducible to one’s own perspective and to being dependent on structures without which there is no durable and livable life” (84, 85). For all of these reasons, Butler warns that “our thinking gets nowhere without the presupposition of the interdependent and sustaining conditions of life” (119).

Margolis is also interested in networks, but as the words “mass democracy” in her title imply, her analysis of canonical fiction concentrates on anxieties about popular sovereignty and collectivities more than explorations of their political potential.<sup>3</sup> Indeed,

Margolis's authors largely understand such networks in terms compatible with Garrett Hardin's influential 1968 *Science* essay "The Tragedy of the Commons," which she cites. Hardin's essay offers "insight about the potential conflict between individual desire and collective well-being" that "continues to influence our understanding of collective behavior." Connecting that thesis to her archive "demonstrates the surprising power of networks to transform rational self-interest into collective failure, to create an association that is not exactly the sum of its individual parts" (12). Although these invisible networks operating through gossip, whispers, chance connections, and informal influence signal "an important shift in who counts as a legitimate political actor," Margolis claims that her objects of analysis emphasize the random, inexplicable aspects of disembodied networks and a "heterogeneous and unpredictable public" rather than "group solidarity" (14, 42). Criticizing Michael Warner's theory of "counterpublic," she argues that her texts refuse "this romance" and its celebration of its "transformative power" (103). For Margolis, the authors in her purview recognize "identity itself as a prison" (103). Instead of groups, counterpublics, and movements, Margolis suggests, they focus on vexed, mysterious relations between individuals and unpredictable networks.

Nelson also takes up Hardin's essay. She does so, however, not to credit him with insights about conflicts between individuals and collectives but to challenge "the supposed ubiquity of the selfish, rational, utility-maximizing model of *homo economicus* described by the liberal economists of the eighteenth century (and seized on in 1968 by Hardin)" (9). Nelson explains how Hardin's argument "that man's inevitable selfishness leads ineluctably to the overuse and destruction of commons" and that "the only recourse for sustainability" is "government takeover" or "privatization" became "a commonsense wisdom that spurred decades of research, response, and policy" (4). Arguing against Hardin's view that people—"non-experts" and "non-owners"—can "only degrade and harm the commons," Nelson points out that it is based on the false premise that there is no "difference between a commons and an unfenced or unguarded natural resource with no management system" (4). Nelson finds "commoning," on the other hand, an "important alternative to state-based sovereignty and its grounding in the liberal individual" (43). She defines "the culture of the commons" as a "practice of self-provisioning and mutual support" that "emphasized the sharing of material resources," communal labor, and valuing "what people can produce together in local community" (6). Calling it "a political sensibility" grounded in "use-value, in face-to-face community and negotiation," Nelson concludes that although it is "not a political panacea," this "vernacular democratic practice

presents some interesting alternatives to its companion and competitor, liberal democracy” (7, 9).

Like Butler and Margolis, Zuck is interested in networks, but her analysis of nineteenth-century US literature also raises questions about democratic collectivities in terms of the “imperium in imperio as a form of divided sovereignty in which two sovereign powers attempt to operate in the same political community and/or geographic space” (17). Conceptions of divided sovereignty, Zuck suggests, “framed in British common law as a political impossibility, became both a cornerstone of American political thought and a source of anxiety in white Americans’ engagements with Indigenous peoples, African Americans, and various immigrant groups” (16). In response, however, these groups produced constitutions and other political documents that “both mirrored and challenged the foundational documents of the United States, asserting the national status of their framers and making the original documents speak differently on issues related to sovereignty, citizenship, and nationhood,” and defending the coexistence of “multiple political affiliations” (71). Because “the distinctions between the separation of powers and the division of sovereignty between state and federal authorities remained contested,” the “door” remained open for new interpretations of divided sovereignty (22), thereby opening up “new avenues of political engagement for Cherokee, African American, Irish American, and Chinese people, who participated in situated attempts to gain political advantage in their dealings with the state” (28). Zuck concludes that her archive suggests how, both then and now, “minority groups (in the Deleuzian sense)” are “both acted on by processes of territorialization and normalization and engaged in powerful creative efforts to form new models and new modes of collective engagement” (220).

Although Zuck emphasizes the collective in her study of how nineteenth-century groups used constitution-making to demand that white Americans relate to them on political rather than racial terms, she rarely mentions bodies in all this activity, unless referring to “the body politic” or “national bodies.” Bodies, however, are central to Butler’s analysis of the disjuncture between popular sovereignty and republican-liberal forms of democracy. For Butler, “resistance has to be *plural* and it has to be *embodied*” (217). This is one of the main arguments of the book, which she elaborates on throughout: When “bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones) they are exercising a plural and performative right to appear, one that asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field,” and thereby “delivers a bodily demand” (11). Butler insists on the significance of the body even as she recognizes that “[n]ot everyone can appear in a bodily

form" (8). Drawing insights from disability studies, she acknowledges that "the capacity to move depends on instruments and surfaces that make movement possible," which means the struggle is also "over how bodies will be supported in the world" (72) and for "public funding of infrastructural support" (138). Learning from disability studies, Butler argues, also requires reconsidering the restrictive way the public sphere has "been uncritically posited by those who assume full access and rights of appearance on a designated platform" (8). She asks us also to consider those who are constrained from appearing, such as prisoners (171), though she argues that the "prison is not exactly the inverse of the public sphere" because "prison advocacy networks traverse the walls of the prison" (172–73). She understands that because in some places, protest cannot take the form of street gatherings, alliances "are sometimes made in other forms, ones that seek to find ways to minimize bodily exposure as demands for justice are made" (125). Ultimately, Butler wonders whether "bodily vulnerability" might be reconsidered as a "form of activism" (123) when we recognize the body's "constitutive relations to other humans, living processes, and inorganic conditions and vehicles for living" (130). Thus, bodies are implicated in these struggles "as both the ground and the aim of politics" (132).

This insistence on bodies leads Butler to critique Hannah Arendt's relegation of bodily needs to the private sphere and to emphasize, in contrast, that "some ethical claims emerge from bodily life" (118). Although Butler values Arendt's contributions to theorizing "the plural conditions of political life" (116), she argues that when "some domain of bodily life operates as the sequestered or disavowed condition for the sphere of appearance" and becomes the "structuring absence that governs and makes possible the public sphere," then "Arendt's view clearly meets its limits," for the body is divided against itself. This division, Butler suggests, is precisely "what is called into question when precarious lives assemble on the street in forms of alliance that must struggle to achieve a space of appearance" (86). Butler also insists that the "claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when, through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being" (88–89). This emphasis on the public sphere as the site of an embodied plural performativity that exceeds speech acts is partly a response to how the public sphere was "perpetually shadowed by the problem of unrecognized labor (women and slaves) and multilingualism" (204). Criticizing how the "disavowal of dependency" becomes the precondition for autonomous thinking (206), Butler suggests instead that the "entrance of the disavowed body" into the political sphere provides the "essential link between humans and other living beings" (87) and that it is "the

point of departure for a new body politics, one that begins with an understanding of human dependency and interdependency” (206–7).

Nelson also engages Arendt, claiming “the practices and possibilities for personhood formed within vernacular or commons democracy” are what Arendt “highlights” in *On Revolution* (1963), when she “considers how citizens generate power in the process” of making revolutions (36). Drawing on the work of political theorist Melissa Orlie, Nelson emphasizes how Arendt imagined “the possibility of something other than liberal sovereignty as democracy’s power is commonly imagined”: “a non-hierarchic political power generated outside of formal institutions, among and by people: in short, a civic commons where the generation of agency works to create political being in forms ‘that are collaborative, not sovereign’” (37). In her conclusion, Nelson returns to Arendt and surprisingly compares her to *Modern Chivalry* (1792–1816) author Brackenridge, whom she credits with advocating a “middle way” that she herself endorses: “a mode of democracy that thrives on the interplay between vernacular and formal practices” (71), nesting “multiple scales for self-government that can balance and overcome local tyrannies, providing the state with the input that wise administration needs from local actors while protecting those actors from mistakes and mismanagement produced by bureaucratic ignorance” (178). Nelson makes the comparison on the following grounds: “Arendt, like Brackenridge, understood that while the machinery of government could save the nation from the tyranny and instability that vernacular practice can produce,” the Constitution could not replace the people themselves but “provided a public space only for the representatives of the people” (175–76). She concludes that Arendt’s work illuminates how “the practice of commons democracy informed colonial and early U.S. experience for decades at the ground level,” even though the “consensus narrative” has dismissed this activity of “ordinary citizens” as youthful, anarchic, and primitive. Although Brackenridge and Arendt have never to my knowledge been coupled in this way, Nelson concludes that the two “make” the same “point”: that “the vernacular, daily ordinariness of commons democracy was neither an obstacle to the cultivation of the Framers’ liberal, representative democracy nor a misunderstanding of it” and that “its legacy and its lessons for democratic practice in the United States are vital” (176).

Although in Nelson’s text, the word “body” usually refers, as it does in Zuck’s, to political collectivities, the body implicitly returns in Nelson’s focus on ordinary people, since she specifies at several points in the book that they are mostly “non-elite, European-descended Americans” (9). At times, Nelson draws on historical scholarship to mark moments when intercultural or Native

American practices may have contributed to the commons culture of ordinary people in the early US, but does not go further than this, perhaps out of concern that we need to “learn more about the intercultural legacies and tensions of commoning practices between and among Native and European settlers than we currently do” (21). She asserts that it seems “*far* more commonsensical that indigenous Americans self-governed” through “the logic of the commons” even though “we do not have a wealth of scholarship on Native American commoning practices” (21). Nelson also worries that the “notion of the commons might actually pose the threat of a new kind of colonization limiting its appeal for study” for Native American studies, given the field’s “current investment in questions of national sovereignty” and “collective forms of indigenous self-governing,” though she does not pursue the implications of this for theories of a white commons (21). In addition to wondering about Indigenous commoning practices, Nelson also speculates about “the commoning traditions and practices of enslaved and free African-descended peoples” (41), hypothesizing that African Americans might have brought such knowledge “from Africa,” though the latter has “seldom” been “considered that way” (21). Nelson’s Bakhtinian argument about the novel’s ability to reveal truths about history in spite of authors’ particular social positions or relatively elite status because “good novelists populate their plots with a variety of living social registers—vernaculars” might lead one to expect that her novels would open up onto scenes of Indigenous or African American commoning (13). Nelson rarely addresses such contexts, however, but does speculate in the book’s epilogue that late nineteenth-century legacies of earlier commoning practices include the ghost dance.

Throughout, Nelson comments on how whiteness was in formation and flux over the course of the period she covers and how this changed the way European-descended people understood themselves in relation to the land, the nation, and other people who lived there. She draws on historical scholarship by Laura Edwards to argue that “backcountry communities” (19) often created “interethnic alliances with local Native Americans” and reciprocally enforced “justice for petty thievery as well as for dramatic offenses like beatings and murder” (86). Nelson sees this as one of many examples of “a fluid world of intercultural alliance in the Middle Ground” that began turning into a “frontier of racialized hostility” over the course of the century (110). Over time, she suggests, forces “aimed at state capture also encouraged racialization” (164) and white “commoners increasingly wanted to access goods they identified with whiteness,” which “ironically” made its “appeal precisely *as a commons*—part of the state capture or ‘taming’ of these alternative practices of democratic sociality during this period” (19).

Even so, Nelson spends a good deal of time forcefully arguing that race and settler colonialism are not the best frames for understanding “[ordinary people’s] . . . ongoing exercises of locally produced political power” (15). Indeed, she submits that attempts to center race and settler colonialism may foreclose the possibility of seeing the value of alternative democratic practices. Imagining an interlocutor who would ask “why *should* we care about so-called poor white trash?” (18), Nelson suggests that attempts to center race and settler colonialism in these contexts entail deploying “generalizations that work like racism—even in the name of anti-racism” (21). Arguing that we need to “question the work of developing racial identifications and violences while figuring out what we can learn, for good and ill, from alternative democratic histories, practices, collectivities, and subjectivities,” Nelson avers that a “fuller history will be more complicated” than the notion of “just a bunch of racists, working on behalf of a racist empire” will allow (19). Our prejudices about “poor white trash,” she concludes, have “misdirected or oversimplified our understanding of the role of ordinary white people in the early nation” (20). In these ways, Nelson maintains that centering race and settler colonialism in a discussion of commoning practices risks overgeneralizing about ordinary white people in early America and condemning them for being racist, imperialist, poor white trash.

This move, however, forecloses in advance the possibility of making questions of race and settler colonialism central to an investigation of early American commoning practices, implying that this could only be done by making generalizations that work like racism. While Nelson focuses on attitudes here, on the question of whether or not white people had racist or violently settler colonialist beliefs, the more salient dimension of settler colonialism in this case is structural: white commons were made out of Native American lands. Although Nelson recognizes “how the land prized for its access to citizenship in the late colonies and early nation came always, one way or another, from Native Americans” (21), she still claims the “key possibilities and conflicts were happening on the ground, and especially on the nation’s frontiers” (15). In the case of the frontier republicanism of squatter communities, the structural problem of white commons being made out of Native American lands is especially difficult to set aside. Yet without subscribing to the consensus history perspective that Nelson criticizes here, which sees “ordinary people as somehow limited in their understanding,” it could be argued that it is necessary to think about changing racial formations, settler colonialism, and commoning practices together rather than trying to hold them apart to create a separate space for imagining

white commoning as an important resource for thinking about the possibilities of popular sovereignty then and now (8).

While race, settler colonialism, and whiteness are not important categories in Margolis's study, they do figure in Zuck's book, perhaps because her focus is not on canonical authors of fiction but on groups such as Cherokees, African Americans, Irish Americans, and Chinese immigrants. Zuck, like Nelson, argues that ideas of race, nation, and sovereignty were constantly changing during this era, but she starts from the premise that "racial logics informed the development of conceptions of sovereignty" (7). In addition, she draws on her archive to illuminate how "American notions of sovereignty were shaped by both transatlantic political discourses and encounters with racialized populations" (6). She is also interested in how "rhetorics of nationhood provided a point of entrance into an international conversation about political culture and territoriality rather than a 'domestic' one about race" for the groups in question (37). While this is a significant contribution, Zuck's claim that she focuses on "engagements rather than just representation" and breaks with previous studies that center on "identity politics" too quickly assumes that earlier work is "identity-based criticism," which focuses on "racial *representation*," and "is often contrasted with aesthetics and formal analysis" (9). The literary scholarship on race in the 1990s and 2000s is not reducible to an argument that "various groups throughout American history used literature to produce coherent identities as a means of resisting oppression" (10). Many of these critics also analyzed how "rhetorical strategies and literary techniques were taken up by multiple populations," devised "comparative approaches," and investigated "political practices rather than focusing on expressions of racial identity" or trying to tell a "coherent story about individual or collective identity" (10). Rather than a radical departure from such work, Zuck's book is a useful addition to this vigorous, ongoing conversation about race, form, aesthetics, and politics. Like all of the early American literary studies I analyze here, *Divided Sovereignties* tells an important, overlooked story about the disjuncture between popular sovereignty and the political form of democracy then and now, while Butler's *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* asks us to more fully account for the bodies that matter as both ground and demand.

### Notes

1. Nelson builds on the work of Bakhtin to argue that novels reveal truths about history through their dialogism, thereby resonating "with the rich multiplicity of intentions of the people who originally used them" and serving the intentions also of "the people who originally spoke in such terms" (13)

2. Butler suggests: “Perhaps the human is the name we give to this very negotiation that emerges from being a living creature among creatures and in the midst of forms of living that exceed us” (43).

3. In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976; revised edition 1983), Raymond Williams observes that “Mass-democracy can describe a manipulated political system, but it more often describes a system which is governed by uninstructed or ignorant preferences and opinions; the classical complaint against *democracy* itself” (195).

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