
Editor's Letter

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I'm writing this letter in the midst of a major Ebola outbreak in West Africa and just days after the first case was diagnosed in the United States. There's anxiety in the air, and although epidemiologists are already assuring global leaders that Ebola "won't be the big one," they also warn that unprecedented international travel and massive urbanization create a "perfect storm for viral emergence."

A number of essays in this issue of *Public Culture* address this topic, directly or indirectly. We begin with two Forum essays about the rise of "big data" and sensor-based surveillance systems. In the first essay, Anthony Townsend argues that new quantitative tools and practices developed by scientists and government officials have drastically increased our capacity to measure and understand cities—while threatening to leave actual city dwellers out of the process. In response, he calls for a reframing of urban science and its application in government that would increase civic engagement in data-driven research, management, and planning. Such an approach, he maintains, would "not only increase the likelihood that such governance reforms will be accepted but also improve their design and implementation, and the quality of the underlying science as well."

Theresa MacPhail begins her essay, "Data, Data Everywhere," with a focus on the problems global health analysts have finding "good" information in a sea of data, but soon moves on to consider the broader consequences of our increasing dependence on new unreliable knowledge to solve complex social problems. If, as Luciano Floridi has pointed out, half of our data are probably junk, then how can we tell the difference between the useful and useless data? MacPhail, who's done extensive ethnographic research in leading epidemiological research labs, concludes that big data is "less about finding solutions than it is about discovering better questions . . . which will require us as scholars to work to develop big data science, not dig in our heels against it."

The issue's first set of research essays comprises two important contributions to current debates about the distribution of agency across human and nonhuman entities. In "Mediants, Materiality, Normativity," Arjun Appadurai contends that failure on the part of "new materialists" such as Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and Jane Bennett to find a way to engage in ethical or political critique can be overcome by moving our focus away from Latour's "actants" to a smaller class of agentive entities that he proposes to call "mediants." Ash Amin, setting his critical sights on the canonical image of urban public space as a site of civic and political formation based around active subjects, explores the implications of thinking the urban landscape as sentient in its own right. Drawing on a wonderfully diverse range of cases in point, from Brussels to Kinshasa, from contemporary Cairo to nineteenth-century Canton, he shows how the politics of place are never reducible to human sociality alone.

There's even greater range in the second set of research essays, starting with a multiauthored piece of urban theory that takes us to four cities of the global South: Bogotá, Karachi, Accra, and Johannesburg. In their essay, Austin Zeiderman, Sobia Ahmad Kaker, Jonathan Silver, and Astrid Wood examine the influence of uncertainty on how contemporary cities are planned, built, governed, and inhabited. In each of their urban case studies, the authors examine uncertainty as produced by historical conditions and as productive of future possibilities. Next up is a pair of essays detailing some of the less well-known consequences of economic liberalization in India. While Nikhil Anand explores how the political and technical controversies of measuring water leakages in Mumbai trouble the state's audit culture, Sareeta Amrute discusses assaults on female call center workers by their male drivers to think about the relationship between economic privatization and privacy in India today.

The issue's last two research essays describe what are arguably even more intimate connections between geopolitics and biology. First, Amy Hinterberger and Natalie Porter examine how viruses and genomes have become the subjects of sovereign claims in contemporary biomedical research. As the authors explain, such claims tether biological materials to constructed origin points in both nation-states and continental regions and seek to alter the property regimes that characterize global biological economies. Next, Bruce O'Neil's essay looks at the entanglement of superfluity and boredom in postcommunist Bucharest, Romania, where the population most excluded from consumer capitalism, the homeless, seek relief from boredom by organizing a market for sexual favors. This singular study, a work of ethnography and living history, provides insight

into the solidifying of class boundaries not only in Bucharest but also in other similarly positioned cities in Eastern Europe and the global South. It also resonates with the interview for this issue, in which the anthropologist Talal Asad talks with Irfan Ahmad about his work to problematize a “seamless web” view of history’s unfolding.

