
Editors' Letter: Transitions

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This issue marks a transition. After a decade of support from the Institute for Public Knowledge *Public Culture* has moved. The editorial office hasn't gone far. We will still be located at New York University. The journal will still be published by Duke University Press. But for the first time in the journal's history it will be sponsored by an academic department: Media, Culture, and Communication. Shamus Khan passes the torch of editor in chief to Arjun Appadurai and Erica Robles-Anderson. We thank the outgoing members of the senior editorial board and the editorial committee. We bring on board a whole new crew.

Transitions are funny things. Everything can change, or nothing at all. In the case of *Public Culture*, the journal was born attentive to transitions. Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai self-published the first issue in the fall of 1988. Within a year the Berlin Wall fell, a million protesters filled Tiananmen Square, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie, and Naguib Mahfouz became the first Arab awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Cold War narratives were fast unraveling, the West was ready to declare it had won, and capitalism seemed to be infecting everything with sameness. *Public Culture*, however, was a venture devoted to widening the frame.

The journal has always served as an intellectual forum in which the multiplicity of cultural emergences could be discussed. Its staple offerings have always come in the form of scholarly articles, essays, and interviews. In different moments it has also featured artworks, etymologies, notes from the field, even a directory of like-minded people and organizations. Looking back through those early issues feels like reading some kind of intellectual zine. It was a scholarly journal with just a little bit of punk rock. The journal was not afraid to include observations not yet fully interpreted, or to expand the definitions of what counted as cultural knowledge. The priority was to notice signs from absolutely anywhere that cul-

tural politics was afoot. To provide some analytic framework for these investigations, the founders coined the term *public culture*.

What was a neologism in 1988 no longer requires an explanation. *Public Culture* may have taken distinctive form in the frothy days of experiments in desktop publishing—a square-shaped journal, a revelation!—but it thrives equally in a digital publishing world of PDFs, downloads, and subscriptions. Throughout, its punk rock proclivities and the intellectual friendships it cultivated have endured. Over and over and over again the ideas published in these pages pushed disciplinary boundaries. The journal remains a platform for social observers keen to explore heterogeneous cultural worlds. In just the past ten years, for example, *Public Culture* has proven to be an analytic framework capable of engaging topics ranging from climate change to Internet celebrity, economic crises to online gambling, media objects to religious revivals. In 2012, *Public Books* was launched as the online review platform of *Public Culture*. It has been a pleasure to watch it emerge from the journal’s vision and network and grow its own wings.

This issue opens with an interview. In “Between Europe and America,” Arvind Rajagopal speaks with Werner Sollors about his formation as a critical intellectual. Sollors came of age in postwar Germany, studying in Frankfurt or Berlin and traveling across Europe. He recalls the way that reckoning with the consequences of National Socialism lived on in one’s psychic substrate: you could leave the country, “but you still had that feeling there was something that you had to take care of, and [that] you had to somehow come to terms with intellectually, in your own mind” (261). It was in this context that Sollors encountered African American literature. From a European point of view, “society’s most marginalized segment produced its finest work” (255), and yet a segregated America guaranteed inadequate reception.

Sollors’s literary interests drew him to Los Angeles, New York, and Boston. There he continued mapping the tensions among politics, race, and aesthetics as he moved through universities, theaters, avant-garde reading groups, and nightclubs. It was a scene where university students might be found at CBGB with a copy of Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* sticking out of their back pocket. African American writers were asking, “What does the world in America look like from a Black point of view?” Yet in a country steeped in ideologies of individualism and American exceptionalism, Black selfhood was kept institutionally outside. Sollors recalls, “When I arrived at Harvard, I wanted to look at books that had been published about blacks at Harvard, and when I learned that there was no such book in existence then, I teamed up with my research assistant and a Tufts colleague and we put together a documentary history” (279). Sollors’s intellectual labor was

also a political effort. He exemplifies a kind of “Cold War humanism” (255), in Rajagopal’s words. This mode of scholarly movement across places and institutions can be a way to reckon with contradictions and “failures of understanding” (283) by decentering dominant narratives, redrawing cultural maps, and making space for artistic works to reshape social worlds.

This issue continues to explore the relationships between biography and the academy with a special section on “Undead Texts.” In short essays, scholars discuss the significance of academic books that transformed their fields. These works are renowned and oft cited yet widely critiqued, questioned, or even disavowed. Some were instant classics while others took time to rise to meteoric fame (or infamy). For some, the contribution is still evident; for others, their contents became so deeply absorbed into the substrate of disciplines that their traces require excavation. Joel Isaac revisits Susanne Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), a book that took an expansive look at the relationship between symbolic forms and meaning. Moving outward from logical propositions, Langer insisted that presentational forms in culture also followed a certain logic. Rituals could be analyzed as more than idiosyncratic expressions of feeling. When Clifford Geertz describes the Balinese cockfight he is drawing on *Philosophy in a New Key*. Such citations may not provide an explicit link but, as Isaac concludes, “whenever we emphasize the centrality of the interpretation of meaning in humanistic study, we are singing from Langer’s hymn sheet” (360).

Lorraine Daston and Sharon Marcus provide an introduction to the “Undead Texts” project. Originally appearing between 1942 and 1983, the books under discussion achieved their popularity in a period when academic and mass-market publishing were expanding. It is perhaps these conditions that helped propel works that stretched beyond a discipline to achieve notoriety. The works don’t sort by genre easily. If they do share some common orientation, it is toward drawing analogies and tracing patterns. They moved between topics and frames by pointing out striking similarities or controversial differences.

For example, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) is “gloriously Undead” (441). As Manu Goswami points out, this book, the most-cited English-language reference in the human sciences, took the ur-category of modern political life, the nation, and explained how it acquired affective force so strong that its citizens are willing to die for its preservation. But this capacious envisioning of print-capitalism, geopolitics, imagination, and collectivity also makes the work feel like quite an analytic overreach.

Daston and Marcus propose that these brilliant works *became* outsiders. In the 1980s disciplinary boundaries hardened as the humanities and social sciences

were fending off interdisciplinary salvos and intellectual arbitrage from adjacent fields. As the scope of inquiry tightened to privilege the local and specific, projects that once seemed ecumenical came to seem eclectic. What begins as a source of inspiration can become a source of profound ambivalence: To cite or not to cite? To teach or not to teach? Can the master's tools dismantle the master's house? Is it worth it to rouse the ghosts?

Academics are trained to take the measure of an argument, to size it up and exploit its gaps. There is perhaps no better text for thinking about the profession's tendencies to overturn consensus than Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Lorraine Daston describes how that little book "about one big idea" undid the very premise of scientific progress (411). Science does not advance through steady accumulations of knowledge. It is an agonistic field marked by crisis, rupture, paradigm shift. Even Undead texts birth their own assassins. As Sharon Marcus's look at Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) reminds us, books may transform fields so completely that over time their "readers come to fault them for not honoring their own premises" (377). We dethrone to get ahead, committing patricides and matricides. Academic kinship is a bloody, haunted mess.

The Undead texts highlight the draw of explanatory systems. Laurie Patton selected Mircea Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1949), a work about numinous experiences and the inexhaustible capacity of the sacred to restore the axis mundi, the high center around which all else is organized. Caitlin Zaloom takes up Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966), a book similarly attuned to the sacred and profane as categories ordering social life. In the fine detail of Zaloom's depiction, Douglas is portrayed as the maven of matters out of place. She was a devoted Catholic, a woman in the British Academy, the sort of intellectual who delivered "brutal takedowns dressed in pleasantries" (419).

Some Undead texts offer the powerful allure of grand narrative. Brooke Holmes selected Bruno Snell's 1946 work, *The Discovery of the Mind*. This postwar paean to Western civilization offered a unifying arc from the Homeric self to Enlightenment humanism by way of Greek rationalism. Despite generations of classicists' best efforts to convince us that "the Greeks *are* always stranger than we think" (367), there are readers compelled to believe otherwise. We live in a moment of authoritarian populisms powered in part by white supremacists invested in the purity of their uninterrupted connection to the Greeks.

Stephen Best continues in the vein of works on Western consciousness that "manage to be 'wrong' in ways that do little to diminish their allure" (431). In *Orality and Literacy* (1982) Walter Ong put forward a thesis of total psychic trans-

formation even as contemporaries were putting forth powerful critiques. Scholars of African American literature were analyzing literary orality, speakerly texts, and the limits of inscription to transmit meaning. German media theorists were attending to the ways that channels structure differences between sense and nonsense, signal and noise. Despite Ong's overstated case of technological determinism, *Orality and Literacy* lives on always already Undead.

Caroline Levine's selection offers perhaps the best clue to the *how* of Undead texts. In Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977) literature was never fully separate from material conditions. The past was never completely in the past. Politics took shape in an open circuit among residual, dominant, and emergent forms, where experience exceeded ideological systems. Texts and ideas travel because meaning is never foreclosed. Indeed, some of the most powerful alternatives to the present emerge from reassembling the past into new forms of futurity. The Undead, after all, is a form of collectivity. Cultural politics are both once and future, forever.

The essays on Undead texts betray a conflicted sort of longing. Autobiographical tells shine through. *The Second Sex* is a book in the hands of an adolescent reading at the kitchen table, interrupted by her father. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is a used book with pages marked up by a previous owner; inside a note read, "This is the most painfully fucking obvious book ever written" (397). But adolescents become college students, then graduate students, then professors. How, in the process of moving from early stages of wonder to disciplinary expertise do they keep their sense of joy and possibility? These books may have moved from *de rigueur* to *déclassé*, but in the last instance affective attachments shine through. As Shamus Khan writes, "I have always admired but never loved [Talcott] Parsons." By contrast, "Goffman opened worlds" (403).

This group of essays on Undead texts sets the stage for yet another life of and for *Public Culture*. We will continue to explore the emergent, the actual, the living, and the ephemeral, each of which might be seen as features of the global. But we also hope to take notice of signs of perdurance, of refusals to turn specter into spectacle, of the uncanniness of the ordinary and of the circulatory logic of the local.

This issue takes up reanimated social texts as well as models of social theory. In "Wave Theory ~ Social Theory" Stefan Helmreich analyzes nineteenth-century attempts to describe social dynamics through emerging statistical methods. The initial task was to give language to patterns visible only through statistical representations. Waves provided a model for understanding how atomic behaviors related to structural regularities. This model quickly became the go-to metaphor

for describing social dynamics. Crime waves, heat waves, waves of change, surfing the waves—the metaphor naturalized. Today it is often taken as a fundamental feature of structure. It sidesteps, however, the elusive question of causality that continues to bedevil those interested in the mechanisms of change.

If the social comes in waves, its psychodynamics are uncanny. In “The Narco Uncanny,” Shaylih Muehlmann analyzes affect in the rural landscape of northern Mexico in the context of an expanding drug trade. The atmosphere is charged with uncertainty. Potential danger abounds. The boundaries between legal and illegal activities blur. Ordinary people and everyday actions become suspect. Anyone could be a *narcotraficante*. Muehlmann names this uncertainty “the narco uncanny.” Muehlmann attends to a traffic in accusations, a tendency toward incriminations by those at the margins of power. She argues that the practice is best understood as a way of deferring recognition in one’s own eyes or in the eyes of one’s neighbors as bound up in the drug trade. Accusations displace the need to name and to know, to categorize once and for all the nature of personal relations to political and social change. Only then can *narcotraficantes* be simultaneously everywhere yet always elsewhere, “in the next house over” (335).

As *Public Culture* enters its third decade, how to proceed? We reenter the scene in a moment of mass protests, general strikes, authoritarian regimes bolstered by right-wing populisms, and millions worldwide in detention camps. There are blockchain technologies, platform economies, new Silk Road initiatives, and a powerful set of fantasies and anxieties about artificial intelligence. The Arctic melts while the Amazon burns. K-pop is a global force in popular culture, and it seems only ex-basketball player Dennis Rodman can go to North Korea. There are still nation-states, secularity never quite arrived, cars don’t drive themselves, and people still enjoy printed books (thank goodness!).

We enter the conversation in two voices, each trained in a different tradition and inflected with a different style. We arrived in the same academic department at the same time and over the course of a decade we became comrades. These pages will likely reflect our deep and abiding interests in such things as materiality, sociality, and the forms of collective life. We also hope what comes through is a sensibility, what the founding editors referred to as “deliberate naiveté.” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988: 3). We poise ourselves to see what comes. The enduring task is to look and look again, to stay alive to the encounters between processes and forms, to take variations on their own terms. After all, fields don’t transform when debates are settled; they transform when conversations begin. *Public Culture* is an archive of transitions, a multidisciplinary record of interactions among those

concerned with emergent cultural forms and social processes. Things will change. Things will stay the same. Above all, *Public Culture* will remain the foremost place for those sincerely interested in observing the long global present.

References

Appadurai, Arjun, and Carol A. Breckenridge. 1988. "Editors' Comments." *Public Culture* 1, no. 1: 1–4.