

Editors' Letter: A Critique of Pure Dumbfoundedness

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Dumbfounded: a portmanteau of dumb and confounded, a state of confusion and bewilderment marked by speechlessness.

Like many, we find ourselves dumbfounded. This state has something in common with shock or trauma in its learned stupor. In this issue we recognize a visceral incapacity to say something *because* we see something.

But speak we must, whether in our own voices, or in the voices of those whom we wish to enable. Our privileged form of dumbfoundedness offers no moral relief through speechlessness. Thus, we offer what *Public Culture* has always striven for: to bridge the world of immediacies beyond Euro-American horizons with critical reflections that likewise privilege no address. Our topics in this issue range from suppressed minorities to the arts of catastrophe, from public secrets to secret publics, from post-grid sovereignties to viralized sexualities, and from meditations on incalculable costs to reckoning with unpayable debts.

Our authors risk giving words to the unspeakable as they invite us to think about the unthinkable, whose brutalized form is the exception and whose routine form is the future itself. Their works critique a paradigm that conceives the world as a matrix of knowns, unknowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. For those who live with the consequences of security state reasoning—refugees, drone victims, detainees, and so on—information lack and surplus amount to the same thing: personhood denied. We share in their learned stupor but recognize that ours is more distanced, more “mediated,” and usually less intimate with mortality. Our dumbfoundedness resembles horror rather more than terror, in the wonderful distinction made by the Italian theorist, Adriana Cavarero.

The pandemic stretches on with no end in sight. Climate-related natural disasters now happen regularly. Even a bright spot in the seemingly interminable landscape of horrors, the US military withdrawal from its twenty-year occupation of Afghanistan, lasted mere weeks. The installed government collapsed and the Taliban took

control. While none of this comes as a surprise, the experience of living through compounding crises can render one dumbfounded as a matter of course.

In the spirit of Immanuel Kant, who recognized pure reason, we believe pure dumbfoundedness needs critique. We let dumbfoundedness serve as an intuition that leads us away from discourses of the known and unknown. Through essays, articles, artworks, and the first original poetry ever featured in *Public Culture*, this issue juxtaposes insights that draw from cultural, diasporic, and mobile experiences. This issue is devoted to imagining otherwise in the face of routine catastrophe and catastrophic routines.

South African artist Nolan Oswald Dennis frames our issue through artworks featured on the covers. *model for theia* (2021) is a rendition of a globe stand. In place of the perfectly round sphere is a bubbling, asymmetric, white-painted shape. Like the ginkgo leaf in Goethe's poem ("Is it one being / Which has separated itself? / Or are these two, who chose / To be recognized as one"), the composition suggests both continuity and distinction. It begs the question: is this a model of worlds coming together or pulling apart?

The back cover shows *model for an endless column (suspended)* (2021). A string of globes, South Pole side up, hangs from the ceiling. The first and last are cut in half. The middle sphere is painted black. Multiple, variegated whole Earth views remind us that there are several ways of inhabiting our terrestrial home. We take inspiration from a multi-geopolitical imaginary as we pay attention to new forms of public culture.

The issue commences with a discussion about collective strategies for addressing overwhelming debt. Lily Chumley contributes "Currency under Value, Currency in Debt: A Conversation with Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Sarah Muir." Muir and Negrón-Muntaner codirect the Unpayable Debt Working Group at the Center for Social Difference. The group formed in response to the Puerto Rico debt crisis and quickly grew into a multidisciplinary coalition of scholars, artists, journalists, and activists interested in understanding and educating others about debt at every scale. They produced several forms of public engagement including academic articles and books; syllabi on Puerto Rican debt, Caribbean debt, and global debt; and an award-winning art installation and community currency project called *Valor y Cambio* that has been deployed in Puerto Rico and New York City. We publish this work in the midst of a cryptocurrency craze that has no place for public monies. This conversation about currency could not be timelier.

Darren Byler's "The Social Life of Terror Capitalism Technologies in Northwest China" brings us to the Xinjiang region, a key thoroughfare for the Belt and Road

initiative, where more than 12 million people are subject or potentially subject to surveillance and policing. Based on extensive interviews, ethnography, and analysis of leaked government reports, Byler renders a portrait of life for Turkic Uyghurs living under “terror capitalism.” Public-private ventures fund the development of predictive systems which are used to justify the construction of “reeducation” camps. These camps supply factory workers for an industrial underclass whose labor and data are continuously extracted to justify additional investments.

We move from the horrors of detention along a global economic frontier to global expressions of solidarity during Black Lives Matter protests. In 2020, protecting ourselves and keeping each other safe involved masking up, staying home, and maintaining social distance. Nevertheless, millions of people took to the streets to protest police brutality. In “Black Mass; or, a Billion Plagues and More,” Travis Alexander asks, “How can we think the ethics of mass public protest in a time of Covid?” (195). Alexander analyzes the ethics of mass “will-to-risk” by way of another viral plague that exposed our porous interdependency: HIV/AIDS.

While other commentators have focused on the willful neglect of the afflicted by political administrations at the onset of these crises, Alexander builds a connection between subcultures that embraced “precarity without end(s)” (196). Among barebacking practitioners of unprotected sex, “bug chasing” was “deliberate viral risk(ing)” eroticized (197). Alexander argues that vulnerability is a gift within a public health system that generates differential harms amongst the afflicted via policing and institutional medicine. His analysis opens a conduit between barebacking and BLM archives based on their common understanding that personal safety—whether through immunization, prophylactics, or privilege—is not enough. Mass risking can publicize histories of vulnerability and thus forge new solidarities for living with the human condition as an experience of “a billion plagues and more” (195).

Mihir Pandya revisits stealth projects in the Cold War era in “Disclosure by Design: What Leaks Produce.” Top secret projects such as the development of the F-117A fighter jet and B-2 bomber involved decades of work by thousands of people. How could such major military developments possibly be kept confidential? Pandya argues that they weren’t. Leaks happened, but when they did, the information was partial and therefore insensible on its own. In this period of secrecy in public life strategies for organizing intelligence flourished. Stealth projects were assembled by “secret publics” that “attempted to design a complex technical system in the dark” by compartmentalizing knowledge to coordinate production with unseen others for unknown purposes (228). In response, a “public sphere of disclosure” flourished in which leaked intelligence was organized into meaning by professionals and ama-

teurs alike (219). Pandya's analysis reminds us that the difference between information and action is that "knowing some things is less important than knowing enough, to replicate a technology, mobilize a constituency, or galvanize the public to act" (234). Dumbfoundedness will not be relieved by an accumulation of facts.

If this issue has a punctum, it is the Interlude. Sinan Antoon contributes "Crazy Horse" and "Anamorphosis/Iraq," the first original poetry featured in *Public Culture*. Antoon grants language for contending with our speechlessness in the face of ongoing violence in generational time.

The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq is one of the most bizarre and tragic events in modern history. That an occupation based on faulty intelligence which led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and millions of displaced peoples was allowed to stretch on in generational time is dumbfounding. "Crazy Horse" conjures the lines of erasure to reveal how inversion, metonymy, and projection transmit imperial logics across contexts and centuries. The nickname of nineteenth-century Lakota Ogalala leader Tasunke Witco, who fought the United States, becomes a call sign used while firing on Iraqi civilians from a Boeing AH-64 or an Apache helicopter.

"Anamorphosis/Iraq" is composed in verses that repeat the justifications for killing Iraqi civilians between 2003 and 2012. We see the distortions that sustained moves to national innocence as war crimes were internalized within the logic of a military that must only ever do the right, good, and inevitable thing. Might as right, no matter what, is at the heart of dumbfoundedness. Only here can home be a place where "Democracy assassinated the family that was there" (242).

The articles resume with "Catastrophic Art" by Fazil Moradi. Moradi issues a fulsome invitation to build relations in the aftermath of violence by opening up to "the haunting of epistemicide" (260). Moradi writes about objects in ethnographic museums and private collections taken from life-worlds that no longer exist by empires that are no more. These institutions position themselves as preservers of cultural heritage who show their collections as acts of hospitality to viewing publics. Moradi, however, observes that these are displays of "catastrophic art." They document crime scenes up close and at unspeakable distance by begging the question: how did this come to be here?

That violent dispossession can be treated as art is an object lesson in "the will to dominate" knowing by positioning the West as uniquely capable of managing the past, present, and future for all humanity (257). Even restitution frameworks circulate fantasies that artworks are only safe in institutions remade to European standards. Moradi counters with a call to "repatriate these [artworks] . . . to their original homes" (259). We hear Moradi's call to move beyond the legal framework of provenance and toward paradigms that center full participation. Critical exam-

ination and critique are generative modes for sustaining many contemporary and future worlds.

We move from the catastrophe of collection to the collapse of the electrical grid. In “Post-grid Imaginaries: Electricity, Generators, and the Future of Energy,” Joanne Randa Nucho looks at unstable energy provisioning as a feature of the political present. In Lebanon and in California, as in so many places, people make do with patchwork systems of batteries and generators during power cuts and blackouts. “Wayn al dawleh?” or “Where is the state?” they ask (270). Whether the public option for power is breaking down or it has never been achieved, universal access is as much a question of infrastructural capacity as political will.

“What if,” Nucho asks, “the grid imaginary also contains within it something like Marcel Mauss’s (2016) elaboration of reciprocity as that which links people together in webs of obligation and entangled fates?” (272). Will universal access to electricity remain a political goal as climate events strain infrastructures? If the shift to renewables translates into subsidizing property owners’ Tesla power walls and backing subscription microgrid companies, then the future is one of energy privatization. In the post-grid imaginary, structural adjustments are billed as innovations. In the Global North and South, energy flows most steadily within and between enclaves of well-connected people.

Finally, and perhaps fittingly, this issue about the limits of knowledge ends with an apple in a garden. In “Green Magic: On Technologies of Enchantment at Apple’s Corporate Headquarters” Christo Sims reports from the 176-acre Apple Park that something has shifted in California ideology. No longer is the scene of innovation a skunkworks operation in a garage or a lab, nor even a nondescript office complex. Sims’s analysis complements Nucho’s attention to the breakdown of public works by showing how landmark corporate architecture “does mythogenic work in the sullied aftermath of neoliberalism’s triumphalist moment” (294).

Sims guides us through the landscape of one of the world’s most famously secretive companies, but it “reveals next to nothing about the actual techniques through which the company accumulates capital and exercises power” (311). There are no supply chains or factory workers or e-waste landfills or tax avoidance schemes to be seen. Yet even professional journalists and analysts can be drawn in by their own investments in getting just enough access to assure they know more than everyone else. The digital technological sublime, it turns out, is “not so focused on computers” (294). Instead, it is sustained by demonstrations of “green benevolence” deftly executed, like landing a spaceship in a private garden in the midst of suburban-industrial sprawl (296).

Looking ahead, the final installment of this volume grounds themes explored

here and in the previous issue (volume 34, no. 1: “Democracy without Freedom”) in a classic terrain: the city. We look with fresh eyes at urbanization, observing that spatialized sensibilities for inhabitation, mobility, speculation, and belonging require rethinking the city as a territorial form. Keller Easterling, AbdouMaliq Simone, and Vyjayanthi Rao will guide us through new explorations of spatial thinking from around the globe.