

The Cosmos and the Polis

ARJUN APPADURAI and ERICA ROBLES-ANDERSON

All transitions promise transformations—and such promises frequently cannot be kept. In this editorial letter, we seek to mark a transition but wish to avoid making promises we cannot keep. We inherited this unique journal shortly after its thirtieth year of existence. There have been five prior editors: Carol Breckenridge, Elizabeth Povinelli, Claudio Lomnitz, Eric Klinenberg, and Shamus Khan. Each left their mark and each helped to make the journal what it is today. Special mention should be made of founder Carol Breckenridge, who vetted, curated, and envisioned every issue from 1988 until 2000. Carol passed away in October 2009. In her twelve years as editor, she gave the journal its special character and voice, made it both a leader and an example for the critical study of transnational cultural processes.

Public Culture has come a long way. It began without a home or a publisher, something of a slender reed fortified mainly by its early alertness to a world of flows, fissures, and frictions that required both culture and publicity to be revisioned. It has grown to be hailed as a “field-defining journal.” The category of “public culture,” which did not exist prior to the journal, now appears regularly in job advertisements, conference and book titles, and critical scholarly debates. Indeed, *Public Culture* has been fortunate enough to have become a site of aspiration, standard setting, and even branding. It enjoys a rare position of both institutional legitimacy and edgy cultural cachet. *Public Culture* has steadily continued to innovate and improve in its beautiful visual features, its unmatched mix of observation and analysis, and in its disciplinary reach. The journal we inherit now is both instantly recognizable and always changing.

And this mix of the permanent and the ephemeral is also true of the world that *Public Culture* has done so much to engage and illuminate. We began when the transnational had not yet morphed into the global. The Soviet world order had only begun its last exhalation, the digital world was still a new and wondrous thing, and the still-forming discipline of cultural studies was largely mired in debates about the Western canon, the pros and cons of multiculturalism, and the relationships between popular and high cultures in the transatlantic world.

The three decades since that heady start have certainly made the space of transnational cultural flows a much darker affair. Our world is marred by the growth

of many cancerous forms of public mediation, by too many cases of brutal ethnocidal violence, and by the spread of terrorisms both by and against nation-states. Most recently we have been battered by the global turn to the right, by the terror of COVID-19, and by the open declaration of the rightness of social death for Black Americans, Indian migrant workers, Roma populations throughout Central Europe, and the Rohingya in South and Southeast Asia. In the course of these decades, *Public Culture* has seen the very axis of its subject matter seemingly shift from cosmopolitics to necropolitics.

At the same time, the explosive growth of online journals, blogs, books, and social media has challenged the role of journals such as *Public Culture*. The journal is squeezed between the large corporate media voices, the many newspapers and magazines that write regularly and well about cultural matters, and several outstanding news platforms based in different parts of the world. At the same time, brilliant small journals and websites have given the space of the avant-garde new signatures and audiences. Artists, curators, and activists no longer need our encouragement to speak from and to academic audiences. The new nature of readers, who now seek out articles and short reads more often than curated assemblages, and the ubiquity of electronic archiving, distribution, and subscription pose additional challenges. All this has forced us to think hard, as editors, about what *Public Culture* might offer that builds on its historical distinctiveness.

This is the first issue of *Public Culture* for which we are entirely responsible, after a series of issues that we managed during the recent editorial transition. In it we signal, by example, some part of our vision for the next four years. The essays in this issue do not have a single theme but they do have a set of overlapping concerns that revolve around the planet, Europe, and empire. Achille Mbembe, an early friend of and author for the journal, opens the issue with a powerful essay on “Futures of Life and Futures of Reason.” In the midst of a terrain of brutality based on racialized reason, necropolitical terror, and a will to rampant destruction still fueled by European hubris, Mbembe finds room for hope. In “Wave Fronts of Calculation,” Erica Robles-Anderson offers a response that draws out some features of this hopeful position. In a world that flickers between calculable and incalculable, she reflects on the prospect for new forms of political resolution, critical imagination, and collective life in a computational age.

In “Sovereignty in a Minor Key,” Thomas Blom Hansen offers a fresh take on the indivisible coproduction of Europe’s imperial ventures and its ideas of liberty, property, and sovereignty. Ranging from theological debates about the humanity of Native Americans among Iberian theologians in the early European incursions into the Caribbean and Latin America, to struggles over the sovereign rights of the East

India Company at the margins of the British empire in India, Hansen deterritorializes Europe while making its internal story inseparable from the expansion of its maritime ventures over the last five hundred years.

This larger European story is also engaged by Arjun Appadurai. In “The Museum, the Colony, and the Planet: Territories of the Imperial Imagination,” Appadurai argues that the museum as a quintessentially European institutional form constitutes one end of a binocular enterprise of which the imperialized world is the other. This relationship needs critical reexamination in a moment in which the epoch of globalization might be giving way to a planetary world (possibly an Anthropocene).

Yet, as Ann Stoler argues in her forceful essay, “Colonial Diffractions in Illiberal Times,” despite the recent application of the trope of decolonization to canons, spaces, institutions, and histories of every sort, it is difficult to know whether what we have here is a repetition, a shadow, a precursor, or a handy trope. Her essay is an invitation to us all to ask whether the colony is a contemporary form that mimics its earlier historical function or an ideal type with multiple incarnations. Here too, Europe marks the spot at the center of the epistemological contest.

In her brilliant essay, “What Is Just Translation?,” Emily Apter continues her ongoing project on the politics of translation. Having analyzed the role of translation in the disciplinary formation of comparative literature, and then the political, theoretical, and indeed theological work that untranslatable terms have facilitated in the West, Apter now outlines a vision of “just translation.” Just translation, or rather “justicing in translation,” turns away from the quest for equivalent terms. Instead, it participates in the wider spaces of restitution, reparation, and renewal. Apter, too, leaves us in a hopeful position, one in which the capacity to evade definition may not be a sovereign right to universality through abstraction. She offers language for rejustification in which collectivity and even unconditional hospitality to one another is founded on recognition rather than on understanding.

This issue was planned and the articles were written largely before we entered the space-time of COVID-19. We note that the virus has shaken stereotypes of disease and distance, sociality and self, European dominance and the incompetence of Europe’s others. The pandemic has unsettled our ideas of expertise and information. It has generated new forms of uncertainty and anxiety. We hope to contribute to ongoing debates about the global life of our latest pandemic before new stereotypes and ideas have had time to congeal into social facts by putting the virus in the context of the planet and not succumbing to the temptation to see the planet solely through the lens of the virus. After all, no form of crisis is *sui generis* and no public culture is total.

Much of the work assembling this issue took place in the conditions of social

distancing. Contributors and editors were working from homes all over the world. We simultaneously undertook the challenge of a complete journal redesign. Staying the course, and indeed innovating in these conditions is a testament to the capacities of our talented, committed, and generous editorial team. Arjun Appadurai and Vyjayanthi Rao had the idea of thinking about the cosmos and the polis through a decentered Europe that nevertheless remains a central player in what is to come. In Vyjayanthi Rao, our managing editor and a member of our senior editorial board, we are fortunate to have a consummate anthropologist, theorist of urban built form, and curator of projects in transnational art and design. She makes our editorial leadership complete.

This issue premieres a new feature of the journal, an experiment in what is possible in academic publishing. Four original artworks—Andrew J. Long’s *Roadside Americana* (2018), Rose Salane’s *El Comercio, The Trade* (2019), Ignacio Gatica’s *Free to Choose* (2016), and Martín La Roche’s *Musée Légitime* (2017–20)—are placed between essays. Together they operate as a set of Visual Interludes, adding an important visual dimension to the conversation. This intervention, from inception, was the work of Vyjayanthi Rao.

Assistant editor Sam Kellogg is not only a crucial member of our team; he is also a PhD student in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication. Higher education is undergoing perhaps the profoundest crisis in any of our lifetimes. What form the university takes post-COVID is by no means clear. Kellogg is a full thinker-partner in these conditions. He helps us stay focused on the urgency and importance of global intellectual projects in these times.

We would also like to thank Executive Editor Rodney Benson and Media, Culture, and Communication Administrative Director Tracy Figueroa. Holding fast and sustaining support for any journal through institutional crisis is a feat all its own.

Through all of the essays in this issue, we see that while *Public Culture* has explored, and will continue to explore, lesser-known edges of the world, we do not believe that the hegemony of Euro-American forms and habits of thought has been resolved, in either theory or practice. The uncanny resemblances among Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro, Rodrigo Duterte, Benjamin Netanyahu, Viktor Orbán and other populist autocrats remind us that we must pay close attention to both old and new centers, known and emergent dilemmas, voices already translated and voices that resist translation. The cosmos and the polis have never been at such odds as they are today. *Public Culture* will try to inhabit and shrink the gap that has emerged between them in our times.

Public Culture Redesign

Public Culture has been redesigned. In this issue the renovation is complete. These changes strengthen the journal by widening the range of possible conversations. They reflect commitments to recognizing that intellectual contributions take many forms, and to pushing disciplinary boundaries by arranging encounters between heterogenous worlds.

Public Culture adds two categories in its redesign: Introductions and Interludes. Introductions reconceives the function of an Editor's Letter by widening the frame. Statements from the editors will appear within the Introductions section, but these will now be uniquely titled entries in order to better reflect their character and the character of each issue. *Public Culture* recently revived the practice of featuring original artworks on its covers. The Introductions section carries an Artist's Statement to better reflect this change. Interludes contain stand-alone works, visual or textual, in any genre. They appear between sections. Scholarly works read differently alongside these counterparts.

The interior is designed with dynamism in mind. The font treatment juxtaposes two rather different typefaces. Portrait was inspired by a French Renaissance typeface cut five hundred years ago. Officina Sans was developed with laser printing in mind. Portrait is elegance, simple and sharp. Officina Sans is a man in a gray flannel suit with a playful boutonnière. The pages of *Public Culture* have a distinctive look—a character, even.

The new logotype reflects this character: traditional form with expressive range. Canela has an inscriptional quality that reflects the designer's experiences with type, stone carving, and hand lettering. The play between print, chisel, and brush gives the font variability and versatility. Legibility is sometimes best achieved by working through heterogenous conditions to develop new contexts and styles.

Public Culture is a journal alert to encounters between processes and forms. It is a forum for discussing cultural politics and social processes from absolutely anywhere. Every article in any given issue may belong to a different field. The job of the journal is to supply the connective tissue for these variegated forms. For those interested in observing the long global present, heteroglossia is required. With a new logotype, cover design, and interior, we poise ourselves to see what comes.

Public Culture is designed by Heather Hensley.