Coming Attractions

Winter 1995

Thinking through Transnationalism
Roger Rouse

Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis
Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman

... and more!

CyberSalon:
To join Public Culture’s online discussion group send an e-mail message titled “Add me to online discussion” to public-culture journal@uchicago.edu, and we will send you easy-to-follow instructions. Our next essay for discussion is “‘A Nation of Thieves’: Consumption, Commerce and the Black Public Sphere” by Regina Austin.

Public Culture for classroom use: Regular single copy rates: $8.50 individuals, $16.75 institutions. Faculty may order multiple copies of a single issue for classroom use at the individual rate ($6.40 each on orders of 10 copies or more); prepayment from the individual instructor should accompany order. The bulk rate for institutions is $12.55 each. Place orders with the University of Chicago Press Journals Division (312) 753-4240 or fax your order to (312) 753-0811.
Call for Contributions

Re-iterations: Public Culture seeks contributions to "Re-iterations," which has three parts: genealogy, etymologies and miscellany.

genealogy, n.: the descent of three keywords: public, publicity, and public opinion.
Genealogy is a reprint section that traces the emergence of a family of key terms: public, publicity, and public opinion. Historical documents that shed light on earlier occurrences of one or more of these keywords, their interrelationship, and their relation to concepts of civil society, will be considered. Submissions are welcome. The suggested length is six pages. Please include a title page citing facts of publication (name of publisher, place of publication, and date). Please mail submissions to Dilip Gaonkar, Department of Speech Communications, 125 Lincoln Hall, 702 S. Wright Street, Urbana, IL 61801.

etymologies, n. pl.: true sense or form of the network of keywords: public, publicity, public opinion, public sphere.
Etymologies investigates the contemporary uses and meanings of the terms public, publicity, and public opinion. Short essays (of approximately six to eight pages) that consider the semantics and pragmatics of one or more of these interrelated terms in the context of a particular language and a particular people are welcome. How do these terms compare across cultures and languages? Do their meanings "translate," and what do their "mistranslations" bode for comparative social theory grounded in what may be hidden ontological statements about civil society? Please mail essays to Michael M. J. Fischer (S.T.S. Program, Bldg E-51, Rm 201B, M.I.T., 70 Memorial Drive, Cambridge, MA 02139).

miscellany, n.: a collection of various kinds, especially news clippings, literary extracts, postcards and other images.
Miscellany reprints media accounts of items relevant to public discourse and debate throughout the world. The section seeks to highlight not only the reported phenomena as such, but also the mediated nature of media coverage. Public Culture especially seeks pieces that are witty or (unintentionally) ironic. Submissions should include all relevant facts of publication and should be no longer than three pages.

announcements of collective projects, conferences, events, and calls for papers will be considered as well. The announcement should be in the form of a press release to facilitate its publication and should be limited to 250–350 words.

network: Public Culture publishes names, addresses, and research interests of network members. Please send your information, including e-mail address if available, to our office.

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Tel: (312) 702-0814  fax: (312) 702-9861  e-mail: public-culture-journal@uchicago.edu
The CyberSalon Over forty Public Culture readers thus far have signed up for the Electronic Online Discussion announced in the Spring 1994 issue. This group of people, and the “space” where we gather to discuss and debate readings in Public Culture, constitute the CyberSalon.

For our first topic of discussion, the editors suggested Michael Shapiro’s essay “Moral Geographies and the Ethics of Post-sovereignty,” in the Spring 1994 issue. Though the pace of the discussion has been relatively sedate, comments have been without exception thoughtful and substantive, and have raised a number of important questions. The editorial office threw out the first question: “How can we apply Shapiro’s framework, and his notions of ‘post-sovereignty’ and ‘moral geographies,’ to understand what is going on in Bosnia? How is it useful, and what are its limitations?” Here are some snippets of the ensuing conversation, to give you a sense of the character of the discussion conducted in this space:

“... I do not see how Shapiro’s concepts of ‘post-sovereignty’ and ‘moral geography’ apply to Bosnia or, for that matter, to much else actually going on in the world at this time. These concepts may fit quite nicely within debates occurring among certain political scientists and specialists in international relations, but they seem quite distant from concrete situations of any sort. I think that Shapiro tries too hard to stretch his territorial imagery to fit around his ideas about difference. In the end, his suggestions about recovering histories and the creation of the subjectivities of ‘peoples’ would seem to recreate the same sort of thinking he sets out to denounce, that of the nation-state...” (David Beriss)

“... There is a lot that I liked in Michael Shapiro’s essay, and I think that it is very important to ‘denaturalize’ the nation-state. My questions (and concerns)
come later on in the paper. He writes, ‘ethical sensitivity involves a commitment
to recognition of peoples without reifying space or neglecting the coherent identity
attached to the historical narratives through which peoples achieve their meaning
and value’ (498). What is meant, finally, by ‘peoples?’ The article at times seems
to fall back on a fetishization of ‘the people.’ Any notion of ‘the people’ is ultimately
constructed. I don’t think that Shapiro would disagree with this, but I think that
the article could use this emphasis . . .’ (J. Macgregor Wise)

‘. . . Is theory something to be ‘applied’ (and is it ‘bad’ if not)? Why is Bosnia
so often the example used, now, to cast suspicion on works of theory? . . .
How clear is it that the Bosnian conflagration confounds Shapiro’s meditation on
post-sovereignty? . . . The essay is at once an analytical and ethical project.
Ethically, it tried to ‘think (beyond) the nation’ in the sense of helping to at once
highlight the politics of territorialism and loosen the hold that territorialism exerts
on most contemporary political imaginaries. Like many other writers in the jour-
nal, Shapiro is trying to think about political identifications, solidarities, and
ethics that don’t map neatly onto the terrain of the state. The essay hardly delivers
an alternative democratic ethic or postsovereign imaginary in a tidy bundle, but
perhaps it helps along the project of rethinking by opening some productive
conceptual spaces for thinking about political spaces. I think reflecting on posts-
sovereign ethics is a productive if far from complete task . . .’ (Mark T. Reinhart)

All are welcome to the CyberSalon. If you would like your name to be added
to the list of participants, please send an e-mail message titled “Add me to online
discussion” to public-culture-journal@uchicago.edu and we will send you easy-
to-follow instructions.

Public Culture Survey Results Many thanks to those of you who completed and
returned the Public Culture Survey included with the Spring 1994 issue. The
editorial group was pleased to see the profile of Public Culture’s public that
emerged from these responses. You are indeed an interdisciplinary group, with
no more than 35% in any one academic field, and including a good number of
students, people working outside the academy, and people residing outside the
United States. About 75% of respondents indicate that they are involved in some
form of advocacy work, and about the same percentage regularly use e-mail.

Public Culture’s subscribers are a loyal bunch: over 60% have subscribed for
more than two years, and some 32% have subscribed for four years or more.
Subscriptions are what keeps a journal like Public Culture alive—thank you for
your support. Public Culture’s continued growth and vitality also owes much to
your own informed word-of-mouth advocacy; a considerable number of respon-
dents indicated that they had first learned about Public Culture from a friend or colleague.

The editorial group particularly values your many substantive comments. Respondents offered compelling suggestions for topics they would like to see addressed more frequently or more fully in the pages of Public Culture. Strong feelings—both positive and negative—were also voiced about “special issues” in which all or most of the essays focus on a particular topic (e.g., the Rushdie Debate, the Gulf War, Aijaz Ahmad’s In Theory). Partly in response to your comments, the editorial group has decided to aim for one special issue each year (out of three issues), as the best balance between the breadth and variety that distinguishes Public Culture, and the depth of sustained discussion that a thematic issue allows. We are also considering compiling a Public Culture Reader to bring together some of the now-classic Public Culture essays that you use most in teaching and in your own work.

Special thanks to those of you who offered thoughtful, sometimes critical, feedback on a variety of editorial issues—pointing out patterns of emphasis that have emerged in the journal over time, taking issue with Public Culture’s silence on other debates (e.g., Bosnia and Eastern Europe), questioning how essays are selected. All of these are important questions, with which the editors continue to grapple.

The Black Public Sphere This special issue of Public Culture is devoted to The Black Public Sphere. It draws in part upon contributions made at two conferences: the first one, “Toward an Ethnography of the Institutions of Caring in the Black Community” was organized by the Africana Studies Program of New York University, and the other, “The Black Public Sphere in the Reagan-Bush Era” was organized by the Chicago Humanities Institute of the University of Chicago in conjunction with the Center for Transcultural Studies. These initiatives benefited from the commitment and counsel of Arjun Appadurai, Laurent Berlant, John Brenkman, Carla Kaplan, Manthia Diawara, Benjamin Lee, Thomas Holt and Ken Warren.

New Personnel in the Editorial Office Lise McKean joined the Public Culture editorial office in October 1993 as the managing editor. In addition to her wit and calm in the face of disorder, she brings to Public Culture publishing and editorial skills. Lise was an early Public Culture reader and her ongoing research on the Hindu nationalist movement and its transnational forms situate her squarely in the topics of interest to the journal. Her book, Selling Spirituality: Religious Leaders and the Hindu Nationalist Movement is in press with the University of Chicago Press.
Janelle Taylor brought her considerable energy, intelligence and humor to *Public Culture* as editorial intern, managing editor and special projects assistant. Janelle has left the editorial office to return to full time Ph.D. dissertation research. The two years she has been with the office have been demanding, initially because of the year-long chaos caused by the move of the journal from Philadelphia to Chicago (in the fall of 1992), and subsequently because of my year-long struggle with breast cancer. Janelle has risen to every occasion and I am personally and professionally grateful to her. We all wish her well in her new ventures.

Finally, Caroline Cleaves, who rounded out the *Public Culture* office has left to pursue full time her Ph.D. in anthropology. We will miss Caroline's persistent effort to bring order to the unruly area of submissions and her ability to do so with tact and good humor. The challenges of serving as editorial intern have been taken on by two new members of the staff, graduate students Shao Jing and Ora Gelley, who promise to bring good things to the journal.
Editorial Comment: 
On Thinking the Black Public Sphere

The Black public sphere is not about identity politics, in which identity is posited as originary, authentic and irreducible to a commodity. Africa, for example, does not operate in this sphere as the source of all black personhood, but provides a way of both despatializing and deracializing blackness. It is actually a counter-Africa.

In a compelling scene in Alex Haley's *Roots*, Kunte Kinte holds up his daughter and says, “Your name is Kisi, behold! the only thing bigger than you.” To survive in America, Black Americans refer to Africa as a source of ego realization, a bank from which to draw a name, a language of defiance and resistance, a legend with lasting significance, a religion and a basis for kinship. In other words, Black Americans can build audiences around Africa as a myth. The importance of *Roots* for the Black public sphere does not reside in the authenticity of Haley's story, or in the need for every Black American to turn to Africa to find his or her true identity. It is in the way in which the author rationalizes Africa as a significant narrative of origins to reluctant audiences, and breaks the records of television viewing.

Afrocentricity could not have existed without *Roots*. After *Roots*, we can say that the academic version of Afrocentrism is preaching to the already converted. Haley made *Roots* to interpret the pathways of the modern Black American. His recourse to Africa makes it possible for Black Americans to counter originality
and identitarian stories of European Americans with their own stories of origin and identity. Haley, Malcolm X and others wanted to use Africa in this crucial manner in order to shield the American Black against the ego deficiency produced by White racism.

The Black public sphere is post-Black-nationalism, and includes the diaspora among its primary audiences. As the international market counters constantly demonstrate, the transnational migration of signs and wares, narratives and archives generates Black life globally, and in many registers. In Camp de Thiaroye (1989), Sembene Ousmane thematizes the tendency of some Black Americans to see themselves only as Americans, and to isolate themselves from the rest of the diaspora. In this moment of diasporic imagination, insofar as “Africa” represents it, Black American cultural production appears to intensify the very blackness that, paradoxically, “Africa” desires. The film brings together an African and a Black American who fight over an American uniform as symbol of identity and authenticity. The two become friends later in order for the Black American to realize that the African soldier is an audience for and participant in Black American culture, with a collection of books by Langston Hughes and Chester Himes, and records by Charlie Parker, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. The objects of American Black public culture are not invested with magical Black properties: the alterity of America here, like the Africa of Roots, confers imaginary value on the objects that circulate. Thus there is neither American nor African-Amerocentricity here. The commodities transport both nationality and racial signs: yet their value for a black diaspora is in the possibility of a public sphere articulated around the circulation and possession of Black things.

The Black public sphere is thus not always a resistance aesthetic which defies modernity and finds comfort in the politics of identity and difference. To think the Black public sphere we have to be willing to rethink the relationship between markets and freedom, commodity and identity, property and pleasure. The Black public sphere puts engagement, competition and exchange in the place of resistance, and uses performativity to capture audiences, Black and White, for things fashioned through Black experience. But under the pressure of the economic and ideological warfare of the Reagan-Bush era, Black forms of expressivity are produced in a very constrained material space.

This is also why the Black public sphere is so linked to the public activity of sexual discourse and regimes of intimacy and the body. It is not just that White racism has waged a war of decorum that names as “improper” Black bodies, consumer vougues, tones of voice, ways of reproduction and family-making and ways of inhabiting space, although it is that. It is not just that Black people
globally have entered the American-style world of consumer identity with such an intensity of self-pleasure that White people feel compelled to worry about the cultural effects of capitalism, although much sensationalism about Black pathology comes from that. It is also that sexuality is a form of circulation and public-making. In this sense sexuality becomes a medium in which Black struggles to define the good life for Black people are displayed and played out. The effects of this in the dominant political public sphere are to turn Black life into spectacles of violence and exaggerated sexualized performance. But within the Black public sphere, sexual discourse involves a spectacular discussion about ethics, politics and everyday life whose seriousness cannot be exaggerated. Resistance politics as usual shuns crossing over and selling out, which is why rhetorics of Black freedom have traditionally used languages of inclusive feeling—dignity, fairness—to describe a desired relation to the law and material life. To reach for audiences from the space of Black cultural production, as the Hip Hop generation, for example, has done, is to risk the violent commoditization of everyday capitalism. But in many emerging sites of pleasure, struggle and discourse, the Black public sphere wants to sell everything as long as it is paid in full.

The Black public sphere is not a neo-conservative discourse, for such a discourse sees Black culture as a pathology. The Black public sphere’s primary audience is Black, and it sees Black culture as an asset. The Black public sphere creates economic, legal and philosophical narratives which it links to Black experience and culture as an aesthetic distinctiveness. It says, “Buy this, or read this because it is authentically Black.”

The Black public sphere is primarily concerned with modernity and its relation to Black people through culture, politics, law and economics. Modernists, from W.E.B. Du Bois to the present, have been concerned with how to adopt modernism and modernization to Black ways of life. They have sought to make Blackness new and remove it from the pathological spaces reserved for it in Western culture, to define their own version of modernity so as to provide a quality of life for Black people and to legitimate Black ways of life as modernist expressions. Black modernism has made it less easy to see that what appears as indigenously American—for example, jazz—is in fact a mode of modernity, distinct from and related to other modernities. Likewise, distinct Black practices of modern Christianity and Islam have inflected both the Black Church and the Black Muslims. In this regard the American Black public sphere is part of a more general process of diasporic world-building.

The Black public sphere can be studied from inside and from outside. From the outside it is possible to look at Black people’s critique of official institutions
for their failure to emancipate the masses of Black people. The public sphere from the inside, on the other hand, imagines Black institution-building as a site for new practices of exchange, performance and signification. It is always dealing with violences of daily life and political disorder. It exploits contradictory circuits of economic and cultural capital to produce the public spheres of Blackness in their national, global and intimate contexts. It is driven by a desire for audience-building, and building the Black good life. This good life is not only a matter of fair shares and popular wares. The good life is an effect of a Black public sphere that does not yet fully exist. It is always living with tradition, struggling with the future.

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