
Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition

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This is an accidental special issue. The collective shape and orientation of the essays presented here did not originate in response to a formal call for contributions. It simply happened. Our title, *Technologies of Public Persuasion*, was imposed somewhat arbitrarily on essays that came together, as it were, on their own, in ways unimagined by the authors and the editors alike. One of the rarer pleasures of editing a journal is when unsolicited submissions begin to signal, assert, and gravitate toward a new problematic of which the editors and their committee of readers are not fully cognizant.

Such an emerging problematic cannot be grasped in terms of a thematic unity, although this special issue does have a common theme. On the surface, each of the essays is concerned with the communicative dimension of public-making and peoplehood, an enduring theme in critical political theories and the allied democratic social imaginaries. More specifically, the essays focus on material technologies of public speaking and communication—ranging from how the transparency of a national language in Indonesia can create a space for national formation (Webb Keane) to how gramophone reproductions can rupture and supplement traditional pedagogy in south Indian music (Amanda Weidman) to how

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cell phone texting can generate a populist movement to dethrone a government in the Philippines (Vicente L. Rafael)—that simultaneously energize and innervate new forms of social life and action. Most of the essays also map, by way of thickly descriptive case studies or depiction of transfigured space (Christopher Schneider), the circulatory matrix, both national and global, through which new discursive forms, practices, and artifacts carry out their routine ideological labor of constituting subjects who can be summoned in the name of a public or a people. But these strands of thematic confluence by themselves are not distinctive or decisive enough to warrant a special issue. At any given moment, *Public Culture*, a journal dedicated to, among other things, mapping the career of the public sphere across different national-cultural sites under the regime of global modernity, has under review a dozen submissions on that general topic. We could cobble together a special issue on, say, publics and counterpublics at a short notice, with its well-trod themes and tropes and its recalcitrant Eurocentric conceptual focus, despite every effort at transcultural contextualization. But that wouldn't be an accidental special issue. It wouldn't surprise or provoke anyone, least of all the readers of *Public Culture*. An accidental special issue, much like the purloined letter, had to be found suddenly in a moment of panic and recognition as it lay scattered, but in full view, as an assembly of manuscripts on our virtual editorial table.

What is distinctive about these essays is threefold. First, they offer form-sensitive analyses of public texts, events, and practices that do not succumb to the temptation of reading for meaning. Second, they foreground the cultures of circulation and transfiguration within which those texts, events, and practices become palpable and are recognized as such. Third, they disclose the play of supplementarity that enframes and ruptures the enterprise of public recognition whatever its object—the ethnolinguistic identity of an embattled minority (Michael Silverstein), a petty economic crime of substitution in a Soviet eatery (Serguei Alex. Oushakine), the homoerotic desires of an early colonial advocate for human rights (Patrick Mullen), or the iconicity of a “hint” in the speculative culture of Wall Street (Michael Kaplan).

A founding ambition of this journal has been to promote form-sensitive analyses of cultural phenomena that move away from, without repudiating, virtuoso readings of social texts, archives, and objects. Today *Public Culture* is better known for its pioneering studies of global cultural flows than for its engagement with mediated public forms. However, the “Editors’ Comments” by Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge (1988a) in the inaugural issue indicate that the study of the semiosis of forms in various registers—elite, folk, popular, and cosmopolitan—was regarded as equally, if not more, important than the study of

flows. In fact, the journal's name, *Public Culture*, is explained and justified in terms of its proposed engagement with the paradoxical nature of cosmopolitan forms as mobile carriers of culture that populate and cross-pollinate transnational publics.

Today's cosmopolitan cultural forms contain a paradox. As forms, they are emerging everywhere: films, packaged tours, specialized restaurants, video-cassettes and sports spectacles seem to be drawing the world into a disturbing commercial sameness. But as vehicles for cultural significance and the creation of group identities, every society appears to bring to these forms its own special history and traditions, its own cultural stamp, its own quirks and idiosyncrasies. (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988b: 5)

The pressing challenge was how to engage these forms as mobile vectors of cultural and social imaginaries without relying necessarily on methods of reading derived from the traditions of the book; or if derived from the traditions of the book, how to readapt those traditions so as to foreground the social life *of* the form rather than reading social life *off* of it. As we asked in an earlier editorial note (Povinelli 2001a): Why is it that some forms move or are moved along? What limits are imposed on cultural forms as the condition of their circulation across various types of social space? What are the materialities of form that emerge from, and brace, these movements, and that make "things" recognizable inside the contexts into which they are inserted? And, finally, what analytic stance—what orientation to transcultural phenomena—would catch, if even glancingly, things that are neither fully denizen nor citizen of their locales? It is these types of questions that lead us to think about circulation and transfiguration, rather than meaning and translation, in the contemporary politics of recognition.

Only occasionally has *Public Culture* been able to address these queries. Nevertheless, one of the foundational assumptions of the journal has been that the dynamics of national, transnational, and subnational public life cannot be truly engaged without understanding flows and forms as integrally related. This foundational assumption allowed the journal, its authors, and its editorial staff to appreciate the contestation over, and refunctioning of, cosmopolitan cultural forms as the pivotal site for exploring global cultural flows, the tributaries of what came to be known later as the problematic of alternative (or multiple) modernities. But it also forced a critical encounter with the traditions of the book as a (or the) model for social analysis—one of the key methodologies of the humanistic encounter with cultural and social texts. If the reading of social texts demands that cultural forms appear in a textualized form and from some sedimented archive, then this

formal demand is a constitutive feature of the “social texts” tradition in cultural studies. That is, this demand is one of the conditions imposed on “form” if it is to circulate across social space. It is how a cultural form must be transfigured in its circulation into and out of the humanistic tradition of the book. Another, equally important demand is that a cultural text be meaningful—that it be a text and confront us as a text, the primary function of which is to produce meaning and difference and to captivate us in the dialectic play between these two poles.

And yet this engagement with form did not materialize to the extent originally anticipated and imagined. The phenomenology of flows, with its tantalizingly disjunct figures and images, obscured the corrigible matrix that bore them. Moreover, like many a journal in cultural studies, *Public Culture* has been overburdened by content gleaned from everyday life as it unfolds in the shadow of global capital. With so much of everyday life left unattended by the traditional disciplines, the cultural analyst of *Public Culture* ilk felt compelled to recuperate and document it, frequently by way of theory and politics. Certainly, essays and special issues have addressed singularly the various thematic strands of meaning and translation, circulation and recognition, throughout the journal’s fifteen volumes. But such analysis has been so breathlessly busy catching and narrating the Baudelaireian play of the quotidian and the fantastic at different nodes of modernity—the metropole, the periphery, and the mobile middle of travelers, immigrants, and exiles—it is barely surprising that it should pay insufficient heed to the dynamic transfiguration of forms across circulatory matrices.

To be sure, there is no fixed mode of reading form as a moving, transfigurative, and transfiguring element of public life. Indeed, neither this issue nor the essays in this issue aspire to fix it. Quite the opposite: the essays demonstrate that public cultural forms are corrigible not only because they are bound to contingencies of audience, occasion, and the material nature of the sign, but also because they are bound by the analytic mode by which they are tracked. What form-sensitive reading can do, whether of a poststructural, metapragmatic, or culturalist sort, is to signal reflexively its own mode of tracking, marking, and reading cultural semiosis.

This interplay between flows and forms unavoidably leads one to attend to the dynamics of circulation, or more precisely what Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma (2002) term *cultures of circulation*. There is a growing recognition of the importance of circulation as the enabling matrix within which social forms, both textual and topical, emerge and are recognizable when they emerge. This is evident in the case of the three self-reflexive social forms/formations characteristic

of modern social imaginaries in the West: the public sphere, the citizen state, and the market (Taylor 2002).

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), Jürgen Habermas shows how the circulation of discussion and commentary about such literary forms as the novel, in coffeehouses, salons, and reading clubs, put into play (and display) a new form of “audience-oriented subjectivity” necessary for the development of democratic public criticism. The circulation of this form of audience-oriented subjectivity depended not only on the propagation of forms—stranger-sociability and rational discourse—but also on subjects and institutions that did not learn to merely interpret and recognize these forms but also to be captivated by them, and that would in time produce television dramas and blockbuster movies whose explicit theme was the limits of rational discourse in a society morally ordered by stranger-sociability. This new form of subjectivity and sociality was nurtured initially in the intimate sphere of the conjugal family, but the “intimacy” of this intimate sphere was itself constituted by the world of letters, market reports, personal journals, and, of course, the deracinating effects of a new kind of labor—wage labor. As these discursive forms, practices, and artifacts carried out their routine ideological labor of constituting subjects who could be summoned in the name of a public or a people, a certain presuppositional density resulted. Foreground became background; these new forms and the conditions of their captivation migrated across and into novel social spaces and institutions. These practices of reading, writing, narration, commentary, and criticism would gradually give rise to the genre of rational critical discourse, allegedly indifferent to the status and power of interlocutors and allegedly both necessary and constitutive of the sphere and nature of the public. These egalitarian norms of discourse practices, embedded in a distinctive culture of circulation that emerged in England and France in the late seventeenth century, prepared the ground for articulating democratic ideas such as popular sovereignty and rule of law, thereby subjecting public authority to the principle of supervision by public opinion (Warner 1990).

Benedict Anderson’s work on the imagined communities of nationalism can be reread in light of Habermas’s thoughts on the public sphere. According to Benjamin Lee (1999: 6):

While Habermas’s work on the public sphere points to the complex interplay between institutions, textualized forms of subjectivity, and discourse about these forms, it is Anderson’s work that begins to show how the form of specific printed texts helps to construct a new form of social consciousness, that of the imagined community of the nation. Thinking the nation

required transportable and transposable forms in which this new type of consciousness could be both embedded and extracted.

For Anderson (1991), novels and newspapers are ideal-typical forms that act as not-quite-silent pedagogies constituting a reading public of strangers. They do so by offering persons a multiple series of narrated experiences as occurring simultaneously in the “homogeneous, empty time” of secular modernity. The reading practices implicit in these semiotic forms make it possible for persons to imagine and recognize themselves as constituting a non-copresent body of people/citizens of a modern nation—as strangers who are no longer strange, exotic, or unexpected (Warner 2002). “The narrator’s voice,” notes Lee (1999: 13–14), “whether it be that of a novel or the objective reportage of a newspaper, presents a seemingly objective representation of events, agents, and subjectivities that are a microcosm of a larger (national) society that embraces the imputed narrator and his readers. . . . The voice of the people is ventriloquated by the voice of the narrator, and the homogeneous empty time of modernity is that of narration itself.” Thus, both the public sphere and the citizen state posit new forms of subjectivity and sociability that depend on the circulation of specific types of textual materials and semiotic forms to imagine and recognize their participation in a totality called *the people*. Arjun Appadurai (1996) extends these crucial insights in his theory of “flows” (and its counterpart, “the production of location”) to explain how the circulation of people, ideas, media, technology, and finance provides the generative matrix for creating myriad and disjunctive “imaginary worlds” when modernity goes global.

Coordinating the semiotics of the market to the histories of the public sphere and the nation presents a real challenge, given that its relation to the traditions of the book may be highly bleached if not absent. Not always, of course. In *A History of the Modern Fact* (1998), Mary Poovey tracks the conventions of double-entry bookkeeping that textually balanced emergent mercantile accounts with questionable mercantile virtues. But even where such apparent textual referents are absent, buying and selling are seminal performative practices, analogous to reading and public discussion and nation-making, but only if the performative of the speech act, so central to contemporary critical theory, is no longer the extensional model for other types of performativity. To suggest why, we need not rehearse the complexities of the circulatory apparatus of the modern market, the dual structure of the commodity form (use value and exchange value), and the pricing mechanism of the money form—all of which ground, animate, and make legible each instance of buying and selling. It should suffice to note, first,

that each promise to buy and sell instantiates the totality of the market and, second, that this promise and instantiation are made possible through circulating forms of value, be they the commodity or money. The market, like the public sphere and the nation, posits a self-reflexive collective agency built around the reciprocal performative action of participants who, though strangers, have equal and direct access to one another. This stranger-sociability, with its wide-ranging cultural ramifications, is not so much a bourgeois cosmopolitan norm as a fetishized effect of circulating forms of abstract labor and finance capital. Where these forms of abstract labor and finance capital are absent, the normative modern stranger vanishes.

As a result, it is no longer viable to think of circulation as simply a movement of people, commodities, ideas, and images from one place to another. “Circulation is a cultural process,” say Lee and LiPuma (2002: 192), “with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them.” And those interpretive communities, whether they be coffeehouses and publishing firms or banks and stock exchanges, set the protocols for interpretation by inventing forms, recognizing practices, founding institutions, and demarcating boundaries based primarily on their own internal dynamics. Lee and LiPuma call these structured circulations *cultures of circulation*. The crucial insight here is rather simple: Although a culture of circulation can be identified by the objects circulating through it, it is not reducible to them. More is at stake, or, in circulation.

We are cognizant of the protean character of the idea of *form* in play here—and the potential criticism that we seem to be moving blithely through different ontological registers, ranging from textual forms, such as novels and newspapers, to forms of subjectivity adumbrated in citizenship and stranger-sociability, as well as to multiplex cultural formations called *the nation* and *the public sphere*. This is deliberate. In a given culture of circulation, it is more important to track the proliferating copresence of varied textual/cultural forms in all their mobility and mutability than to attempt a delineation of their fragile autonomy and specificity. Or, it is more important if the purpose, as Michel Foucault long ago suggested, is to move between the seductive sparkle of the “thing” and the quiet work of the generative matrix—the diagram, as Foucault’s acolyte Gilles Deleuze would name this node in the production of life that provides us with the outline of the thing and its excess. This *ethnography of forms*, for want of a better term, can be carried out only within a set of circulatory fields populated by myriad forms, sometimes hierarchically arranged and laminated but mostly undu-

lating as an ensemble, as a melange, going about their daily reproductive labor of mediating psychosocial praxis. Certainly somewhat paranoid, this analytic bifocality is method as much as theory. It insists on an almost neurotic attentiveness to the edges of forms as they circulate so that we can see what is motivating their movement across global social space and thus what is attached to them as both cause and excess. If this sounds like the pursuit of the hidden hand, it is. But this hand is simply how the local conditions of the entire assemblage are experienced and manifested. For example, if the public sphere, the citizen state, and the market are to work with minimal disruption, the worlds of people, things, and values must appear attached to nothing more than their fragile skins, and the drama of the survival of these orphaned singularities and nomadisms must be riveting.

If it is no longer viable to look at circulation as a singular or empty space in which things move, it also is no longer viable to reduce a form-sensitive analysis of culture to the captivating dialectics of meaning and its innervation. Translation—the (im)possibility of meaningful commensuration—has long been circulation’s double, its enabling twin. And translation and circulation have long been seen as both the value and price of a truly democratic public sphere.

Indeed, the history of translation as a discipline, a political and philosophical project, and a religious attitude must sit as a necessary backdrop to any study of the production and circulation of texts and text-analogues as social figurations. The reason seems straightforward enough. A form can be said to move intelligibly (as opposed to merely physically) from one cultural space to another only in a state of translation. Take, for instance, Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* and the surrounding controversy—something all too familiar to the readers of *Public Culture*. The so-called original, the clothbound edition in English (interspersed with patches of Bollywood Hinglish), was always already overdetermined. It was recognized as an allegory and as yet another South Asian post-colonial diasporic novel imbued with magical realism à la Gabriel García Márquez, even though the author himself flagged an affinity to Günter Grass. The novel was read (or unread) differently in different cultural spaces—by the Bradford Muslims who burned it, by Rajiv Gandhi whose government banned it in India, by Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran who issued a *fatwa* against Rushdie and his publishers, and by those who invited Rushdie to speak at the Columbia University School of Journalism on the two hundredth anniversary of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Within a short duration, the novel was translated into several languages. Each decision to produce a translation signaled the commitment of a nation and a publishing house not only to the message within and aesthetics of the novel but also to the value of free speech. The profits made and the prices paid

for the civic and economic promotion and support of this value were human as well as political: the Italian translator was beaten and stabbed, and the Japanese translator was killed. That death itself did not sway the author, publishers, or even nations from renouncing their commitments was evidence of both free speech's captivation of citizens and their capture by this culture of circulation. All of this is to say little more than that translation is a complex, multifaceted signal phenomenon—signaling the interior content of aesthetic form and message and the exterior political and social commitment to the circulation of this form and message as well as entailing the cultural logic of the circulatory matrix itself.

But the straightforward reasoning of translation studies obscures a yawning disjunction between translation as a political and economic project and translation as an exemplar of theories of meaning (Asad 1986; Povinelli 2001b). The aporia at the intersection of these two projects provides the opening for a revitalized approach to form-sensitive analysis of global public culture. On the one hand, we now have countless socially informed studies of the conditions of possibility for various forms of translation and countless studies of the profoundly political nature of translation. We can remember studies that demonstrate the role of translation in nation formation and the consolidation of north-south axes, such as those detailing how translations from Latin into the vernacular were critical to the emergence of a national imaginary, or how the translation of southern languages into northern languages consolidates, or not, global hegemonies. These studies and others have provided us with a better understanding of the practice of translation under current global regimes of circulation, including the institutional apparatuses, disciplinary-professional mediations, and capital investments that are necessary for the translation machines to spit out their texts. Among other things, these studies have foregrounded the technological resources and financial incentives of multinational publishing houses to publish (in translation, if necessary) a work, such as Rushdie's, in radically different cultural settings, nearly simultaneously, and with different conventions and strategies for decoding and consuming messages, literary or otherwise.

On the other hand, traditional theories of translation as a system of meaning-value arise from and are oriented to the possibility of undistorted movement of linguistic value from one language to another, one genre to another, or one semi-otic system to another. These theories of meaning-value continually orient us toward a theory of the sign, mark, or trace and away from a theory of the social embeddedness of the sign, of the very social practices that these histories wish to describe. In other words, no matter the richness of these social studies, theories of translation continually return to the question of how to translate well from one

language to another as meaning is born across the chasm of two language codes—or in the Derridean revision, the dilemma of graspability that exists prior to this birth, this voyage. Once we set foot on this topological terrain of chasms and gaps, we are swept up into the maelstrom of debates about incommensurability, indeterminacy, and undecidability in translation. From Donald Davidson to Jacques Derrida, true real-time translation is an impossibility, a mere normative orientation, a failure—if a productive failure, at that.

And yet it is no more clear how to integrate—or whether to integrate—the problems of translating the meaningful horizon of Rushdie's text with the captivating politics of its movement than it is to integrate an analysis of the spatial logics, marketing strategies, and gastropolitics of a beefless McDonald's in Mumbai with the marketing of “authentic” indigenous cuisine in tony Melbourne restaurants. Recourse to meaning as a semantic value disseminating between the original and its translation, or entirely lifted off the matrix of the original, does not nearly do justice to the materiality of these cultural forms—let alone their disjunctive circulatory cultures. What do we make of the materiality of the “burger” and of the kangaroo tail within the production of publics and counterpublics, of national identity and the multinational cuisine business? The analytic dilemma of the material vehicularization of cultural forms has been foregrounded by Paul Kockelman (2002) in his dissertation on the linguistic mediation of social life in a Q'eqchi'-Maya village in Guatemala. There a woman may be seen to physically harm her husband if, while he is working to clear a new pasture, she accidentally or intentionally tears a tortilla in her frying pan. How should the organization of gender and power be analyzed if one of the sites of its investment is the fragility of a tortilla? Other aspects of materiality are equally at play in the aporia between meaning-focused and socially focused studies of translation, such as the physical organization of space from the perspective of the disabled or the comparative physical deterioration of bodies under different labor regimes.

As the liberal dream of translation is innervated, materialized, and reduced to a normative struggle, a new analytic focus on what we call *transfiguration* seems to be emerging. This could significantly alter the way public-making through regimes of recognition is approached. No one school has decisively claimed the terrain this concept covers. It is doubtful even whether the scholars we see developing the analytical protocols for understanding circulation and transfiguration as a means of displacing meaning and translation understand themselves to be doing so. Nevertheless, across works that could not be more different in style, tone, content, and discipline, we see the development of new techniques for grasping mapping functions rather than meaning—for foregrounding the diagram as a

coordinating and figurating machine, the primary components of which are not located in the play of signifier and signified but in the functions of indexicality and mimesis (iconicity).

In this new work, social life is understood to be composed of interlocking, multifunctional diagrams that act as demanding environments on subjects, texts, and practices. In some ways, the notion of a demanding environment returns us to the eclectic Maussian lineage that branches off from his sociological discussion of the techniques of the body—Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s perception, Michel Foucault’s disciplinarity, Pierre Bourdieu’s bodily hexis. But the focus has turned decisively to the power-laden, interlocking levels of and contestations between cultures of circulation; the transfigurations they demand on the palpability, intelligibility, and recognizability of texts, events, and practices; and the play of supplementarity that enframes and ruptures the enterprise of public recognition, whatever its object. All these compose the demanding environments of “things” and their movement. They provide things with their mappable dimensions and ghostly distensions, their protocols for safe movement, or not, across cultures of circulation. But whether demanding environments are built to make one’s life easier or harder to negotiate, one’s body seem smoother or more jagged, they entail, demand, seduce, intoxicate, and materialize rather than simply mean. They member subjects and tell them how to recognize something as something else in various environments and with various values—McDonald’s even in the absence of cow meat, or any meat at all.

Thus it is not sufficient to ask what happens to meaning as it is borne across the chasm of two language codes, of genre, of one semiotic mode to another, say the movement from oral forms of repetition to written forms of iteration. We have to query further: What are the generative matrices that demand that things—including “meaning” as a captivating orientation and phantasmatic object—appear in a decisive form in order for them to be recognized as value-bearing as they traverse the gaps of two or more cultures, habitations, imaginaries, and forms of life? Now, it may well be that being’s captivity by meaning and difference is one of the mapping effects of modern liberal and capital forms. But the approach to this captivity would radically change how we sliced into the politics of recognition.

It seems somewhat trivial to write that circulation and translation as problems of meaning and difference have been the definitive issue of the contemporary moment and the central dilemma of the politics of recognition. Diaspora’s discomfort is thought to be denuded by finding some fine calculus between understanding difference meaningfully and denying it altogether—whether through

physical or cultural genocide, decisive acts, or laissez-faire neglect. And yet, as the essays in this volume attest, sensitivity to the transfigurative demands of the material cultures of circulation pull to the forefront the contexts and conditions of becoming—the entailing, demanding, seducing, and enticing intoxications that produce the various surfaces of a recognizable form as such—rather than measuring better or worse, more or less transparently or opaquely, one version of one cultural or social text rather than another. The politics of recognition is never as simple as identity and difference but is always already a politics of transfiguration from one culture of circulation to another. The question fundamentally concerns the power to shape and to erase this shaping, to map and to backdrop the mapping.

Focusing on transfiguration rather than translation—the refashioning of a text as such for different demanding-sites—orients our analysis toward the calibration of vectors of power rather than vectors of meaning-value. We will care more about the distribution of power than of meaning, more about institutions of intelligibility, livability, and viability than about translation. Indeed meaning-value, its sovereignty or dissemination, will cease to command our attention in regimes of recognition, and instead we might focus on the social forms these regimes demand.



This accidental issue magically brings together so many of the concerns and aspirations of *Public Culture* into a happy conflux that it seems only appropriate that it be dedicated to the founding and longtime editor, Carol A. Breckenridge. We do so with affectionate respect.

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