



# Writing Public Culture

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## Introduction

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This special issue of *Poroi Journal* attends to the topic and practice of writing public culture. Public culture is theorized and produced in this issue as a contested terrain in which meanings, ethics, and “ways of life”<sup>1</sup> are negotiated among differently situated social actors. Public culture might be understood as a “zone of debate” that is fraught with disputed notions of identification and possibilities for becoming.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, public culture is rhetorical—constantly in need of being produced, rewritten, and newly imagined. A public emerges as differently situated individuals become interpellated to a site of belonging, a community, a set of desires, values and norms.<sup>3</sup> And such interpellations, or hailings, might work with or against or in any number of vexed relationships to dominant power relations. The formation of differential cultures, or counterpublics<sup>4</sup> are constantly being mobilized to transform the

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<sup>1</sup> See Raymond Williams (1989) for a discussion of culture. Culture is an amorphous and contested term that is used to frame this issue in part because of its flexibility. The essays explore the notion that, as rhetorical scholars and writers, we might invite others to join us in a set of ideas, values, or modes of critique and imagining that might shape and be shaped by our lived experience.

<sup>2</sup> Arjun Appadurai and Carole Breckenridge (1995) attend to the tensions between the forces of nation and globalization. Gayatri Gopinath reads their text as moving our conception of publics beyond Habermas’s notion of the public sphere to the more contested terrain of public culture, which “captures the sense of resistance, co-optation, critique, and agency with which subaltern groups interact with popular culture” (2006, 199).

<sup>3</sup> See Althusser’s (2001) theory of interpellation for a discussion of how the subject is formed through the encounter with power that functions as a “hailing” and Warner’s (2002) reworking of Althusser’s theory as a constitutive moment in the formation of public culture and counterpublics. For a productive consideration of the mediating function of norms in community and alliance formation, see Seyla Benhabib (1986). Extending Benhabib’s observations, Janet Jakobsen writes, “Through rhetorical, but non-foundational, criteria we can convince those who disagree that our vision of the world is not just an expression of our own interests, but is, in fact, better for us all. Thus the public is constructed as the space in which various personas and communities can participate in the project of forming and giving criteria that will guide us toward a future” (1998, 125). Following this genealogy of public culture, this issue explores the various rhetorical strategies through which such critical publics might be mobilized.

<sup>4</sup> This is to take seriously the possibility for the formation of resistive counterpublics and differential sites of consciousness and belonging that arise when the identity demands of hegemonic culture are rendered intolerable (e.g. in the case of what José Muñoz describes as disidentification) (1999). Such moments might allow for alternative site where we might generate belonging or community, as with Chela Sandoval’s (2000) notion of “differential consciousness,” in which we move across sites of feminist consciousness, generating a flexible relationship to ideology and community, as distinct from the possibilities for counterpublics in Michael Warner’s sense of politically active group.

political terrain of public culture. The aim of this volume is to generate text that invites readers to turn, to pause, to engage in a set of ideas and stories that, through their combined force, might spark a collective imaginary that provides a point of entry into daily and mundane sites of power and social hierarchy.

Under what conditions do critical culture workers mobilize counterpublics? This issue explores those conditions contained within evocative performative writing at the convergence of the critical and the creative. The authors included here engage performative writing that “pulls the pin on the binary opposition between theory and practice” (Conquergood 2002, 145). The collected texts also in various ways foreground rhetorical production and the efforts to render alternative meanings intelligible and, indeed, *moving* to those potential publics they seek to hail. If publics are not prefigured or given, but rather are constituted *within* the rhetorical events that gain significance within realms of discourse, then this special issue is one effort to gesture toward the politics at stake in such possibilities.

This view of public culture as rhetorically produced—as pliable and mobile, as contested and moving—invites us to attend to the craft, the invention, the aesthetic means through which we generate knowledge production. Many of us are not formally trained to be sensitive to the subtleties that might inflect the craft of our writing. Attention to the *craft* of writing remains most explicitly bound to the domains of creative writers: fiction and nonfiction writers, poets, film makers, playwrights. We tend to think of creative writers as different from academic writers. Indeed, there is an investment in maintaining the distinction between these genres of writing: one is meant to be legitimized as grounded in an epistemology of rigor, with residual traces of empiricism and objectivism, while the other is meant to entertain, move, and sensitize us to those deeper meanings we might gain from examining our lives and the lives of others.<sup>5</sup> But what is at stake in maintaining, or blurring, the distinctions between the lyrical and the intellectual, between the fictional and the empirical, between creative and critical modes of inquiry and expression? At stake is the possibility to break out of academia’s traditional boundaries, to break these epistemic binaries, and to potentially create compelling visions and critiques that incite unruly imaginaries and connectivities. This issue takes up the task of blurring these boundaries in an experimental gesture to create a productive space in which creative writers come into

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<sup>5</sup> See James Clifford’s (1998) argument to this effect and Kamala Visweswaran’s (1993) work, which blurs the boundaries between ethnography and fiction.

contact with academic writers so that creative and critical modes of inquiry mutually constitute one another. It argues that the contested terrain of public culture is an important intersection of the creative and critical, one where politics is very much at stake.

Eula Biss undertakes such a venture of foregrounding politics at the intersection of the creative and the critical in her essay, “Back to Buxton,” in which she explores the vexed racial politics of leaving home and the impossibility of any easy or innocent return. Buxton, Iowa serves as the site of possibility within her piece—a place that represents, for Biss and perhaps for Iowa and places like it, “a kind of promise.” Biss’s journey carries us into a critical investigation of whiteness: “I was tired of the odd caricature of myself that danced in front of me like a puppet as I walked through the streets of a place where my race was noticed,” she writes. “In those places I saw, as I imagined everyone else did, my whiteness, dancing there, mocking me, daring me to try to understand it.” Her story marks the limits of integration and the unspoken costs—both to people of color and to whites—of our liberal stories of “heroism and triumph.”

Like Biss, André Brock works through his “personal and academic response to multiple crises of representation,” yet for Brock, these surround the fixity, expectations, and contexts out of which Black identity emerges as a cultural form. His examination takes the internet as a productive place of both “interiority and exteriority,” one that offers a site to explore the formation of a complex, contradictory, and dynamic Black American public. Brock finds the “in-group” quality of post-Katrina internet blogs a useful site to explore the heterogeneity of Blackness—not as a public sphere, per se, but as a “third place where matters of import are discussed among a select group of initiates,” beyond the pale of the white gaze.

Nick Kowalczyk takes us on a journey into the disciplinary structures at work in the formation of working-class, Rust Belt culture. In the Lorain, Ohio of his teen years, “being ‘gay’ had little to do with sexual orientation” and more to do with the pressures of downward mobility and tough masculinity. There the forces of class and race, gender and sexuality, collide as Kowalczyk’s expressions of “white-collar sensibilities” were challenged by his friends’ assertion of heterosexual and masculine normality. Everything about Kowalczyk undermined his manhood: his politics, his taste in movies, his voice, even the softness of his hands marked him as less than a straight man, but also, threateningly, as *more* than a working-class man. These signifiers show how culture emerges through intricate rhetorical productions of the self that emerge both on and off the page and not always within signifying contexts of our own choosing.

Kerry Reilly takes us to the slippery edge between the morose and the mundane as she recalls playing “The Grave Game”: she’d “rattle off” the names “on the mausoleums that face the road on the way to the South Shore Mall,” which she knew by heart. Her essay delves into a deep ache within U.S. culture surrounding life, death, and anxious questions of eternity. Laughing, crying, dancing, running, banging a drum, the multiple and incongruous ways in which we humans deal with death: Reilly’s piece marks some of the similarities and differences of loss that constitute public cultures.

This special issue invites *Poroi* readers to reflect on how we participate in multiple sites of public culture, the norms that shore up those sites, and the ways in which those sites are written and potentially rewritten. It also invites us to consider the power and limits of rhetorical performance in reconfiguring social hierarchies and the extent to which individuals’ writing might intervene in the terrain of public culture.

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