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Introduction

Publics are queer creatures. You cannot point to them, count them, or look them in the eye. You also cannot easily avoid them. They have become an almost natural feature of the social landscape, like pavement. In the media-saturated forms of life that now dominate the world, how many activities are *not* in some way oriented to publics? Texts cross one's path in their endless search for a public of one kind or another: the morning paper, the radio, the television, movies, billboards, books, official postings. Beyond these obvious forms of address lie others, like fashion trends or brand names, that do not begin "Dear Reader" but are intrinsically oriented to publics nonetheless. (There is no such thing as a pop song, for example, unless you hear it as addressing itself to the audience that can make it "pop.") Your attention is everywhere solicited by artifacts that say, before they say anything else, *Hello, public!*

Much of the texture of modern social life lies in the invisible presence of these publics that flit around us like large, corporate ghosts. Most of the people around us belong to our world not directly, as kin or comrades or in any other relation to which we could give a name, but as strangers. How is it that we nevertheless recognize them as members of our world? We are related to them

(and I am to you) as transient participants in common publics, potentially addressable in impersonal forms. Most of us would find it nearly impossible to imagine what social life without publics would look like. Each time we address a public, as I am doing now with these words, we draw on what seems like simple common sense. If we did not have a practical sense of what publics are, if we could not unself-consciously take them for granted as really existing and addressable social entities, we could not produce most of the books or films or broadcasts or journals that make up so much of our culture; we could not conduct elections or indeed imagine ourselves as members of nations or movements. Yet publics exist only by virtue of their imagining. They are a kind of fiction that has taken on life, and very potent life at that.

Behind the common sense of our everyday life among publics is an astonishingly complex history. The idea of a public is a cultural form, a kind of practical fiction, present in the modern world in a way that is very different from any analogues in other or earlier societies. Like the idea of rights, or nations, or markets, it can now seem universal. But it has not always been so. Its conditions have been long in the making, and its precise meaning varies from case to case — especially now, as it has found such variable extension in the postcolonial world. There are ambiguities, even contradictions in the idea. As it is extended to new contexts and new media, new politics and new rhetorics, its meaning can be seen to change in ways that we have scarcely begun to appreciate.

This book brings together eight essays on the theme “What is a public?” The essays try to show that this deceptively simple question introduces an immense variety of inquiries. Properly understood, it can reframe the way we understand literary texts, contemporary politics, and the modern social world in general. Perhaps because contemporary life without the idea of a public is so unthinkable, the idea itself tends to be taken for granted, and

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thus little understood. What discipline or method has a claim to say much about it? How would one go about studying it?

People often speak these days not just of *the public* but of multiple publics. And not without reason, since the publics among which we steer, or surf, are potentially infinite in number. In one way, this makes the analytic question tougher; publics might all be different, making generalization difficult. In another way, to emphasize multiple publics might seem to get rid of the analytic difficulty completely: since publics are all different, why generalize? But to speak in this way only defers the questions of what kind of thing a public is, how publics could be studied, how you know when one begins and another ends, what the different kinds of publics might be, how the differences matter, how the history of the form might be told, and how it might matter differently for different people.

The question “What is a public?” requires, to begin with, an explanation of two apparently contradictory facts. The first is that the category seems to presuppose a contingent history, varying in subtle but significant ways from one context to another, from one set of institutions to another, from one rhetoric to another. The second is that the form seems to have a functional intelligibility across a wide range of contexts. How can both be true at once? How could readers in eighteenth-century London and filmgoers in twenty-first-century Hong Kong belong to publics in the same way? Does it make sense to speak of a form common to both? Can it be described in a way that still does justice to the differences of setting and medium?

A public is inevitably one thing in London, quite another in Hong Kong. This is more than the truism it might appear, since the form must be embedded in the background and self-understanding of its participants in order to work. Only by approaching it historically can one understand these preconditions of its intelligibility.

To address a public or to think of oneself as belonging to a public is to be a certain kind of person, to inhabit a certain kind of social world, to have at one's disposal certain media and genres, to be motivated by a certain normative horizon, and to speak within a certain language ideology. No single history sufficiently explains all the different ways these preconditions come together in practice. Yet despite this complexity, the modern concept of a public seems to have floated free from its original context. Like the market or the nation — two cultural forms with which it shares a great deal — it has entered the repertoire of almost every culture. It has gone traveling.

The scope of this translation to new contexts might tempt us to think of publics only in systemic or acultural terms — much the way markets are usually understood. We could understand the globalization of the concept as a shift in the conditions of communication, taking place in ways that participants cannot notice and beyond the control of any merely local culture. Various models already exist for such an analysis, more or less attached to a wide range of political programs, from deterministic theories of media technology to deterministic theories of capitalism, from celebratory accounts of informational rationality to postcolonial skepticism about globalization as ideology. One might, for example, explain the global extension of publics as a result of the West's power in imposing its forms in every context touched by colonialism.

But this explanation, despite all the truth that might lie behind it, is not much of an explanation. Like all the other varieties of acultural explanation, it defers the question of how this form in particular could adapt itself to, or be imposed in, so many contexts. And to identify the form only with its Western articulation might be to block from view some of the most significant points of difference, both in colonial settings and within Western cul-

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tures themselves. Filmgoers in present-day Hong Kong might be both enabled and constrained by a form whose genealogy has much to do with the London book trade after the Restoration; but that does not mean that they have been merely passive recipients of the form (nor that modern Londoners have been). Hong Kong films, moreover, now have publics elsewhere, just as English books did then.

Confronted by the local histories and contexts that make the form work, we might be tempted by the opposite approach, treating the idea of a public with nominalist skepticism: it just is whatever people in a particular context think it is. Its meaning depends on its “appropriation.” It is all local culture and contingent history. This rather desperate solution, which too often passes as historicism in literary studies, eschews the problem of translation altogether. Obviously, I think the generality of the form in the contemporary world requires more reflection. I suggest below, in fact, that the idea of a public has a metacultural dimension; it gives form to a tension between general and particular that makes it difficult to analyze from either perspective alone. It might even be said to be a kind of engine of translatability, putting down new roots wherever it goes. I have tried to describe both the historical path by which publics acquired their importance to modernity and the interlocking systematicity of some of the form’s key features. Though I concentrate on Anglo-America, my hope is to provoke more comparative discussion of a form that has been one of the defining elements of multiple modernities.

To develop the topic exhaustively is beyond the reach of this collection. Here I try to dig below the intuitive sense we have, as members of modern culture, of what a public is and how it works. The argument, as developed in the title essay, is that the notion of a public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating

discourse, a social entity. I hope that the explanation below will render this cryptic formula clearer. What I mean to say about it here is simply that this pattern has a kind of systematicity that can be observed in widely differing contexts and from which important consequences follow. The idea of a public does have some consistency, despite the wide variety of its instances. The social worlds constructed by it are by no means uniform or uncontested, but they are nevertheless marked by the form in common ways.

The paradox is that although the idea of a public can only work if it is rooted in the self-understanding of the participants, participants could not possibly understand themselves in the terms I have stated. Among other reasons, it seems that in order to address a public, one must forget or ignore the fictional nature of the entity one addresses. The idea of a public is motivating, not simply instrumental. It is constitutive of a social imaginary. The manner in which it is understood by participants is therefore not merely epiphenomenal, not mere variation on a form whose essence can be grasped independently.

That is not all. One of the central claims of this book is that when people address publics, they engage in struggles – at varying levels of salience to consciousness, from calculated tactic to mute cognitive noise – over the conditions that bring them together as a public. The making of publics is the metapragmatic work newly taken up by every text in every reading. What kind of public is this? How is it being addressed? These questions and their answers are not always explicit – and cannot possibly be fully explicit, ever – but they have fateful consequences for the kind of social world to which we belong and for the kinds of actions and subjects that are possible in it.

One example is shown on the cover of this book. What kind of public do these ladies make up? Posing for each others' cameras at home, they might seem to be not public at all. They might seem

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merely to imitate familiar mass media genres: the fashion runway, the Hollywood promotional still, the celebrity profile, advertising. Are their cameras simply signs of media envy, icons for an absent mass public? If so, it is at least interesting that the ambition of publicity matters so much to them. Why should it?

As it happens, the photograph comes from a collection of photo albums compiled by a circle of drag queens who came together, from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties, in a New Jersey house they called Casa Susanna. (Other snapshots from the series can be seen in the magazine *Nest* [Summer 2000].) The suburban, domestic scene in which we find them—panelled and centrally heated—is being put to an unusual use. It is a space of collective improvisation, transformative in a way that depends on its connection to several publics—including a dominant and alien mass public. To most people in that mass public, of course, these queens would be monsters of impudence, engaged in nothing more than *flaunting*. The private setting protects them from an environment of stigma, but clearly their aspiration is to a different kind of publicness.

The ladies of Casa Susanna are doing *glamour*, which for them is both a public idiom and an intimate feeling. Its thrill allows them to experience their bodies in a way that would not have been possible without this mutual witnessing and display. And not theirs alone: they must imagine that each of their cameras allows the witnessing of indefinite numbers of strangers beyond the confines of the room. The more strangers, the greater the glamour. From other photos in the albums we know that they each competed in local drag balls as well; the cameras are more than merely wishful props. The photo itself must have been taken by another drag queen, presumably captured in turn by the camera in the upper right. All these cameras on the one hand indicate the absent attentions of the mass media; but on the other hand they create publicly

circulating images, making possible a different style of embodiment, a new sociability and solidarity, and a scene for further improvisation. Like the She-Romps discussed in chapter 2, the queens of Casa Susanna are revising what it means to be public.

In many ways, the unending process of redefinition — always difficult and always conflicted — can be strategic, conscious, even artful. Much of the art of writing, or of performing in other media, lies in the practical knowledge that there are always many different ways of addressing a public, that each decision of form, style, and procedure carries hazards and costs in the kind of public it can define. The temptation is to think of publics as something we make, through individual heroism and creative inspiration or through common goodwill. Much of the process, however, necessarily remains invisible to consciousness and to reflective agency. The making of a public requires conditions that range from the very general — such as the organization of media, ideologies of reading, institutions of circulation, text genres — to the particular rhetorics of texts. Struggle over the nature of publics cannot even be called strategic except by a questionable fiction, since the nature and relationship of the parties involved in the game are conditions established, metapragmatically, by the very notion of a public or by the medium through which a public comes into being.

As several of the essays try to show, interplay among these different levels can be complex. In some cases, for example, a conscious strategy of style can be seen as struggling to compensate for conditions of circulation, perhaps vainly. “Styles of Intellectual Publics” argues that this often happens when academics try to reach popular audiences through the plain style. In other cases, interactions that seem to have no manifest political content can be seen as attempting to create rival publics, even rival modes of publicness. “Publics and Counterpublics” proposes that queer and other minor publics can be seen in this light, and “The Mass Pub-

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lic and the Mass Subject” suggests that half-articulate struggles over the mediation of publics are general in mass culture. In still other cases, aesthetic effects can be produced by the dialectic between conditions of textuality and the strategies made possible by those conditions, as, for example, by manipulating incommensurable modes of publicness in unfamiliar ways. “Whitman Drunk” reads Whitman’s poetry as such an enterprise.

This book proposes, in other words, a flexible methodology for the analysis of publics. It tries to model, through a range of case studies, the sort of multileveled analysis that, I think, is always demanded by public texts. That, at any rate, is the best face that can be put on a collection that is heterogeneous for plenty of other reasons as well. The essays that follow were written for different occasions, over more than a decade. A few of them could be described as queer theory, others as public-sphere theory or simply as literary criticism or cultural history. I do not try to resolve all the generic or methodological unclarity that might result, let alone the conceptual and stylistic shifts from older essays to more recent ones. My consolation for the embarrassment of inconsistency is that the very heterogeneity of the essays might help to suggest the range of projects that can spring from my central theme.

On some points I do think the method is consistent. It is essentially interpretive and form sensitive. I urge an understanding of the phenomenon of publics that is historical in orientation and always alert to the dynamics of textuality. The mode of proceeding in this book will therefore seem strange, possibly silly, to those in the social sciences to whom the public is simply an existing entity to be studied empirically and for whom empirical analysis has to mean something more definite, less interpretive, than attention to the means by which the fiction of the public is made real. This school of thought continues to march along despite all the criticisms that have been leveled against it.¹

On the other hand, the historical method and literary criticism in their usual modes are in themselves not adequate to the analysis of publics. Analysis can never begin simply with the text as its object, as literary criticism is wont to do. Publics are among the conditions of textuality, specifying that certain stretches of language are understood to be “texts” with certain properties. This metapragmatic background – itself of infinite complexity – must be held up for analysis if we are to understand the mutually defining interplay between texts and publics. Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption. And that circulation, though made reflexive by means of textuality, is more than textual – especially now, in the twenty-first century, when the texts of public circulation are very often visual or at any rate no longer mediated by the codex format. (One open question of this book is to what degree the text model, though formative for the modern public, might be increasingly archaic.) For all these reasons, the phenomenon of publics requires a disciplinary flexibility. The exigency of such a flexible method might account for the relative invisibility of the form as an object of sustained inquiry in academic thought.

Half of the essays are new; the others I collect here because of their bearing on the theme. One or two have complex histories of their own. “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject” was written for a 1989 conference introducing the English translation of Jürgen Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. It addresses a debate in social theory, trying to introduce concerns that we might now associate with queer theory. In 1989, of course, queer theory was not yet a recognizable enterprise. I could not write that essay now. Its emphases might be very different from

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those of the more recent essays. I have not tried to rewrite it for consistency, partly because I do not know if it could even be done and partly because the essay has been cited by many others and it seemed best to leave it in its original shape. “Sex in Public,” on the other hand, was written almost a decade after “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject.” Coauthored with my friend and collaborator Lauren Berlant, it, too, owes much to the context that gave rise to it, in particular its attempt to redirect the field of queer studies. Many of its arguments I have pursued elsewhere, in a non-academic work of political polemic titled *The Trouble with Normal*.² It serves in the context of this volume as a case study in struggles over the mediation of publics.

The first two essays stand together as a kind of general introduction of the subject. “Public and Private,” which was conceived for a planned volume called *Critical Terms for the Study of Gender and Sexuality*, reviews the conceptual complexity of the terms “public” and “private,” traces the major debates of public-sphere theory, and introduces the idea of counterpublics in relation to feminist and public-sphere theory. The next essay, “Publics and Counterpublics,” treats the complexities of “public” as a noun. This essay more than any other stands at the heart of the present volume, elaborating the idea of a public as I have presented it in this introduction.

Doubtless there are other stories to be told about the coherence or motivated incoherence of the essays. For some readers, perhaps, the central story here will be one of queer theory. Certainly a major motivation of the essays, without exception, has been to bring some clarity to the process by which people have made dissident sexuality articulate; how they have come together around nonnormative sexualities in a framework for collective world making and political action; how in the process people have challenged the heteronormative framework of modern culture

while also availing themselves of its forms; how those forms of collective action and expression mediate the sexualities and identities they represent; and how many of the central aspirations of the resulting queer culture continue to be frustrated by the ideological and material organization of publics, both of dominant culture and of queer culture. The essays are examples of this process, not just analyses of it. They are the means by which I tried to articulate a place in the world. (This is especially true of “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject” and “Sex in Public,” both of which were written against what at the time felt like huge blockages in the sayable.)

The way I pursued this project of self-clarification, however, increasingly put me at odds with the identitarian gay rights movement. The period over which these essays were written was one in which the American lesbian and gay movement enjoyed increasing visibility and a considerable measure of success. Yet I became convinced that it had paid a high price in the process. The movement had embraced, as the definition of its own constituency, a privatized notion of identity based in the homo/hetero language of sexual orientation. Along with many other academics who were developing the field of queer theory in the 1990s, I thought this language distorted sexuality and its politics.

Queer theory, meanwhile, got to be very good at redescribing nonnormative sexualities and the flaws of identitarian thinking. But partly because the field relied so heavily on psychoanalytic theory for this purpose, it was somewhat less adept at describing the worldliness of sexuality and the conditions of the social-movement form. As I began speculating on the close relation between sexual cultures and their publics in the modern context, I came to the conclusion that one of the underlying flaws of the gay and lesbian movement was the way it obscured and normalized the most compelling challenges of queer counterpublics.

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This is the argument of *The Trouble with Normal*. That book was written in an attempt to reopen some communication between the organized movement and those who were increasingly disaffected from it. It does not use the vocabulary of public-sphere theory explored here. Yet the arguments of that book and this one are, I believe, mutually illustrative. *The Trouble with Normal* is an odd book in many ways, perhaps not least in trying to advance an analysis of publics while also trying to rally a public rhetorically.

The tension between reflective analysis and hortatory position taking will no doubt be seen in a number of these essays as well. It is rather more than the usual theory/practice dilemma, which concerns me very little. The problem in this case is that the preconditions of rhetorical engagement with publics are the object of an analysis that is motivated in large part by a rhetorical engagement with a public. Conceptually, this is like trying to face backward while walking. Preposterousness of this kind is familiar in queer criticism. On the whole, I think the balance in this book tips toward analysis, but I have not tried to eliminate the tension. I do not think that I could do so entirely and am rather persuaded that it is productive on both sides. “Styles of Intellectual Publics” reflects on the two modes and their relation to different publics, making the tension between them itself an object of analysis (and, a bit, of hortatory position taking).

The other motivating subtext of these essays has been the long conversation, now of some fifteen years’ duration, with my colleagues in the Center for Transcultural Studies. There, more than anywhere else, I have found not just comprehending readers and tough critics, not just friends whose brilliance was constant inspiration, but a sustained environment for collective thinking. Much of the work in these essays emerged from dialogue, in a way that I cannot do justice to here. More people than I can name took part

in the conversation. Obviously, Lauren Berlant has been a collaborator of a special kind; even where she is not named as coauthor (as in *The Trouble with Normal*) she has been a tacit partner. Ben Lee and Dilip Gaonkar have been the organizers and catalysts for the center's discussions; to them I owe an unpayable debt. It is my hope that this book, insofar as it contributes to anything, will direct attention to the distinctive intellectual project of the center, now finding rich realization in the work of so many of my colleagues there: Arjun Appadurai, Craig Calhoun, Vincent Crapanzano, Dilip Gaonkar, Nilüfer Göle, Ben Lee, Tom McCarthy, Mary Poovey, Beth Povinelli, Charles Taylor, Greg Urban, and many others.

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