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A Conversation: Revisiting Publics and Counterpublics

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Leslie James is an historian of West African and Caribbean political and intellectual histories. Her book, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the end of empire* (2015) shows how black thinkers stretched the category of 'intellectual' by melding their ideas, political organizing, and social community. Her next book examines how the circulation of ideas in the West African and Caribbean press played a constitutive role in the processes and outcomes of decolonisation.

Karin Barber's work focuses on the anthropology of texts, oral performance, popular culture, and religion. Through books like *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (2007) and *Print Culture and the First Yoruba Novel* (2012) Barber has developed approaches to textual production in social context, as well as exploration of popular genres and cultural forms.

Lara Putnam is a historian of the Caribbean and migrant communities in the Americas. Her articles and most recent book, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (2013), traces how collective social formations emerged from the music, correspondence, and newspapers of migrant communities that faced increasing racialised borders and barriers to their physical movement.

Michael Warner has published on secularism, social movements, print culture, publics and the public sphere, and American literature. He is currently working on a book on American evangelical movements.

On 31 March 2017, the Yale MacMillan Center hosted a roundtable discussion between Karin Barber (University of Birmingham), Lara Putnam (University of Pittsburgh), and Michael Warner (Yale University), chaired by Leslie James.

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The conversation published below was the culmination of a day of activities that included close readings of the individual papers in this special issue, as well as a reading group where all participants discussed the relevance of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Bryna Goodman, and Michael Warner for analysing colonial newspapers and the publics they facilitate.[1] "A Conversation" emerged from discussions between Barber, Putnam, and Warner in both the Roundtable and Reading Group discussions.

LJ (Chair): Michael, this year [2017] marks fifteen years since the publication of your essay "Publics and Counterpublics" in a special issue of *Public Culture.* This issue brought together a collection of works including Charles Taylor's framing of a social imaginary, Craig Calhoun's argument for an enlarged conception of the public sphere, and Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma's work on cultures of circulation, to name a few. Could you open the discussion by perhaps reflecting on what you were trying to do with that article, and how your thinking might have evolved since its publication?

MW: Let me start with just a word about the relation between the focus on publics and the concept of a public sphere. I've been in these arguments for almost all of my adult life so I kind of wish they would go away [laughter]. Is it just openness? Is it actually a sphere? That's kind of a product of American translation. In French it is worse, in French it is called *l'espace public* and Habermas doesn't actually use that language. But we had so many arguments in the 1980s and 1990s about whether the sphere had, in fact, totality. Whether it was a unitary space in any sense. And it is actually from those arguments that Charles Taylor began speaking of a social imaginary and of the importance of a foreground-background relation. That is, in any practice that people have—like publishing newspapers, or voting, or standing up and preaching, or an evangelical address in the marketplace—any of those practices has behind it, seldom made explicit, some picture of what the society is and how it hangs together. So, for example, voting implies that even though you know that your vote is not likely to be decisive, votes aggregated across the whole society count as a decision. So these backgrounded pictures of the social might be one way of understanding the publicness of the public sphere, if you like. That is, a kind of imaginary convergence point that is not actually present to you or materially manifest.

And it was from this kind of analysis, as well as an ongoing struggle over about twenty years where people were trying to figure out what is Eurocentric or culturally specific about the idea of the public sphere, that I tried in "Publics and Counterpublics" to focus on a different problem. That is, given that the totality of the public sphere might be merely imaginary background or a kind of rhetorical projection, how do these spaces form? What are the rhetorics and cultural forms that we have to have on hand in order to speak of a public or multiple publics or counterpublics? So, I was really trying to bring down to earth a theoretical conversation that had already begun in the 1980s, which you can see in the Craig Calhoun volume *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* and turn it into a tool for analysing discourse on the ground. The question that I've been always preoccupied with is how does discourse create the social space through

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which it moves? I thought this was a great way to focus that question. And it was also a way to revise my own earlier work on the public sphere in eighteenth-century America because I had found that that was always misunderstood.

That work had left me classed with a whole generation of Americans as a Habermasian. Whereas it seemed to me that my first book was carrying on a fundamental argument with Habermas from the beginning to the end about the role of print. At that time there was a kind of technological determinism about print. "Print logic" was a phrase you saw everywhere. And Benedict Anderson's "print capitalism" seemed to me an unanalysed category. So my first book was actually an attempt to show that there is no such thing as print culture. Print takes all kinds of different formations in different cultural settings and people have to have some kind of perception of the medium in order for it to have the effects that we attribute to it.

The "Publics and Counterpublics" essay was also an attempt to return to that problem and describe the conditions under which any medium or context can be apprehended as a public medium. By the same token it seemed important at that point to insist that just as not all print has this character, not all cultures of print have this character. Once you have the idea of a public, once that becomes part of the repertoire of action, so to speak, then it can be seen in other media contexts; that is, in performance, in religious ritual, or in the circulation of film. And the project I'm working on now is about preaching from this point of view. Because I realised that all those years that I thought I was arguing with Habermas I had, kind of unconsciously, taken on board his assumption that the public sphere was secular from the beginning. So I had to go back and look at the period in which sermons are appearing in newspapers and evangelical preachers are organising the same kinds of ad hoc assemblies of strangers that were so interesting to me as the real-world materialisations of publics. So that's what I'm working on now: to try and figure out to what degree we've, sort of, organised the history—and this isn't a colonial context by the way, it is settler-colonialism in an earlier period of empire so it is not exactly what the people in this workshop are thinking of as colonial—but to what degree we've organised that history in terms of twentieth-century categories of social knowledge. I think that way of reopening the question animates a lot of new issues about the relation between print and oratory, for example, or preaching.

I'm sitting next to an expert on this subject [Barber], but in the context of American culture and American history you very often hear people talk about orality, by which they mean something quite unrelated to the orality of a society where literacy is not very widespread. Walter Ong made a distinction between primary orality where there is no writing, and secondary orality where it is only elites that have writing. Well, even colonial America is neither one of those situations because literacy rates are so widespread. So, what is "the oral"? Does it have any kind of salience or meaning? Is orality just a back projection from the dominance of print? I am now engaged in a project that's trying to figure out a lot of complicated questions about the status of a concept like text as it moves across occasions of preaching to printed texts that are then circulated as sermons. Where does it acquire its objecthood? Where does it acquire its fungibility from a performance context where a preacher is authorised to speak by very particular felicity

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conditions? These turn out to be very complicated questions of cultural history and media analysis.

I wanted "Publics and Counterpublics" to be the essay that would open up those questions. That would open up the question of how local discursive interactions project the conditions of their own success and then we take that as being the public sphere.

LJ: Karin, Michael has mentioned your work on oral and print publics in Africa. You are working at the moment on Yoruba-language print culture in Lagos, Nigeria, and other surrounding areas from the 1890s to the 1930s. What has your work on West African publics suggested for you about the specific local aspects of public spheres?

KB: Yes, thank you. Let me start by describing some of the work that's been going on in West African colonial print and other forms of communication, just to see whether some of it might be helpful in trying to think more widely about colonial publics.

First of all, who are these people producing printed texts in various colonial situations? Unlike Habermas's late eighteenth-century prosperous, established, confident, continually rising bourgeoisie, I would think that the producers and consumers of the colonial print cultures that we've been looking at were precarious. They were small elite groups of literate elites for much of the colonial period, operating in a space of unease and constraint. One of the sources of their unease was that they drew both their status and their insecurity from their proximity to the representatives of colonial power. That was a peculiar situation for them to be in. Now this space in which they were precariously suspended was also bilingual or often multilingual, which is another difference from the Habermasian public sphere. Print, especially newspapers, was a forum in which languages cohabited. Leigh Denault's article in this issue, for example, shows five or six languages published and printed in the same paper, in columns side by side.

The interfaces and juxtapositions of languages are a site where often contradictory assertions about class, locality, localness, and cosmopolitanness are set in motion. Often these different side-by-side linguistic texts are not translations of each other. You may say different things in different languages. But they cohabit and they are in some way brought into a state of equivalence to each other because they occupy equivalent slots in these papers. Even if they're divided between two different papers they're still put into relations of equivalence because the paper is a recognised form, and every paper is, in some way, filling a space that other papers could equally be filling. Newspapers are also a place where the coexistence of oral and written modes is negotiated. The colonial Yoruba papers from Lagos in Nigeria that I've looked at actually invested quite a lot of effort and energy in capturing oral genres. They were not especially interested in capturing hallowed oral traditions of tremendous authenticity. They were collecting street culture, popular ballads and recent anecdotes and narratives, urban folklore, which they aimed to preserve by putting them into print. And they were practising forms of addressivity which mimicked speaking address, all the time constantly experimenting with it. So that is my second point: that this print sphere was

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bilingual or multilingual, and that the interfaces were places where all these issues of place, class, and oral and written were negotiated.

Now the third point, which actually emerged quite strongly from our previous workshop in Cambridge [organised by Andrew Arsan, Emma Hunter, and Leslie James and hosted by CRASSH in 2015], is that these producers of colonial print culture were transnationally networked. In many cases their non-national links were much more prominent than their sense of being within a nation. These networks had both a personal and a more detached, free-floating form. The personal form in West Africa was based on the elite's extended kinship, marital, and business relationships stretching along the coastal strip of West Africa. In British West Africa the members of the elite were Anglophone and mostly Christian; they were married to each other or belonged to families that were split between Calabar, Lagos, Accra, Cape Coast, and Freetown. So they actually had cousins in all these places. The steam packets that carried the mail called at all these ports along the West African coast, and these elites would hop on and hop off and visit their kin. By the same mail packets, obviously, the newspapers were being carried. So this material dimension of connectedness was highly visible and active in the way they ran their lives.

But they also had virtual links that were more extensive than their personal physical mobility. They acquired and read other newspapers from many different places around the world. From the UK, they could get not only major national newspapers but dozens of periodicals, including small parish magazines that most English people would probably never read. Somebody would bring one back and a Lagos newspaper would take bits of it, excerpt them, and republish them. They clipped from British, Caribbean, and American papers. They read a lot of Marcus Garvey's paper, the *Negro World*, which appeared often in the Lagos press. What's more interesting perhaps is that they had access to Indian papers. They often reported on things that were being said in the Indian press, and drew comparisons with political and social developments in Lagos.

This raises two questions. First, how were these material personal networks and these print-based transnational networks articulated? How do you bring these two things into one type of analysis? And second, who were they addressing? If you have this sense of being in touch with all these different places, incorporating elements from publications from all over the world, what kind of address are you emitting? Is it multiple, layered? If you incorporate texts written by people on the other side of the world, does that mean that they are addressing you? Or that you're responding to them? Not necessarily: you may be incorporating their material in order to address and respond to somebody else. So, the questions of the multiple addressees and the multiple speaking positions from which these addresses are being emitted becomes extremely complicated and difficult to pin down. Which brings me back to the question of addressivity, which we discussed earlier in the workshop today, as a general question we need to look at more in analysing what's happening in a print culture and, specifically here, colonial print culture.

LJ: I want to come back to the issues of addressivity. But first, Lara, your work picks up on some of Karin's points about being networked.

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LP: Thank you, thank you to the organisers for pulling together such a wonderful conversation to be able to join in. I want to talk around a few thoughts that have emerged for me from putting my own research into dialogue with this broader array of case studies and theorisations that are before us. I study migrants and the worlds they created for themselves, both face-to-face worlds and broader invoked senses of collectives. The pattern of migratory circulation that I study centres on the movement of migrants in and around the greater Caribbean: so, people leaving places like Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, and smaller islands to go to places like Panama, Venezuela, Cuba, or eventually Brooklyn. These migratory movements ended up generating, by around 1930, a British Caribbean diaspora of some three hundred thousand people if you count first-generation immigrants and their locally born children: people of British Caribbean heritage living outside their islands of origin. I think of this as a migratory sphere, a sphere of migratory circulation because many people are moving many times over the courses of their lives. Some people are circulating through multiple migratory destinations and then ending up back at home, others are circulating and ending up in a new place but keeping in touch through a variety of forms. One of the increasingly important ways people kept in touch were local presses, because one of the things that British Caribbean migrants do in place after place as they travel is create local presses.

This migratory movement is, perhaps, the most literate nonwhite population anywhere in the world in its era. You have relatively high literacy within the British Caribbean to begin with and then you have a self-selection of migrants. The British Caribbean migrants in places like Panama, Costa Rica, and Cuba are both more literate than the societies they were coming from, and also more literate than the societies around them. So, you have literacy rates around 75, 85, or 95 percent among these migrant communities. And then there is the British Caribbean community within New York, which becomes quite significant by the 1930s. By the 1920s a quarter of the population of Harlem is British Caribbean born. The other thing to note is that there are disproportionate numbers of women who move from the Caribbean to New York. The result of this is that by 1925 the largest concentration of British Caribbean women and girls in the world is in Harlem, rather than in either Kingston or Port of Spain. And that population is basically 100 percent literate because of migration restrictions within the United States.

Local presses therefore become very important. The local presses and the migratory movement arise in tandem because you have the creation of both eager readerships and eager writers at the same time. And this quickly becomes much more than the sum of its parts. People begin to speak about having a newspaper, having a local newspaper, as a crucial part of community formation and advancement. Once you have a local paper you begin to realise that, among the things you can do with it, is that you can establish these exchange relations between different papers. You can reprint items alongside letters from home. You may have a friend who lived in Panama but then moved on to Harlem, who will write a letter back to a friend in Panama, and they will then choose to publish the letter in the paper so that more friends can read and find out how so-and-so is doing in his new home.

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What emerges is a deep personal intimacy to this space that is created within these newspapers, which are relied on to connect not just strangers but people who know each other face-to-face. And cheek-by-jowl beside this kind of item is an incredible internationalism. The newspapers that are most frequently reprinted tend to be some of the larger newspapers from islands of origin, like the *Kingston Daily Gleaner,* or the *New York Times,* or the major London dailies. But also increasingly over the course of the 1910s and 1920s you see West African and South African newspapers being cited. These are circulating. Sometimes this occurs by means of quotation from the *Negro World*, which becomes one of the crucial pieces of connective tissue. But it also takes the form of direct circulation. So you have exchange relations established between Lagos newspapers and British Caribbean–published newspapers in Panama. Or you have individual news from Cape Town flowing to Trinidad to be cited and quoted. What I've argued in my work, then, is that we see a rise of anti-colonial internationalism that is created because the press creates a crucial transnational space for exchanging information.

This is where I appreciate Michael's point about the public being a very historically specific formation. The people who are publishing the newspapers that I'm describing are deeply steeped in exactly that tradition. But there's another element to the historical specificity of the particular print public sphere I study. It becomes a realm for the sharing and comparison and analysis of the experience of antiblack racism.

What is happening globally, in these same years, is the rise of white supremacy, including new and explicitly antiblack policies and rhetoric and new immigration laws and new restrictions on movement. Restrictions on entry by race are put in place or expanded by Australia, by Canada, by the United States. Now, I know this as a historian, but even if I didn't know it as a historian I would know it because they talked about it in the newspapers all the time. So what you have is a mobile population of colour who are both within and outside of the British Empire in these years and who create their own space, discursive space, of interaction within which information is continually exchanged. They run into white supremacy at its worst in place after place, and they read in the newspapers about how similar policies are being experienced elsewhere.

News of the treatment of coloured citizens of the British Empire is one of the recurring themes in each and every one of these papers over time. People are explicitly drawing connections between what's happening in the Rand or what's happening in Cape Town. Indeed, the disfranchisement happening within South Africa is given continuous coverage within the British Caribbean. People are both encountering the world and having the opportunity to talk about it in a discursive space that is both deeply intimate—there is a conversational nature because you can communicate with old friends—but it is also very public.

That space of disinterested self-presentation, of claiming the right to speak in a public-spirited way for a collective, is deeply important to them. They understand the weight of this. They understand how rights claims made within this register have a particular weight within the Western tradition and they claim that and they own it. They quote Shakespeare within it but they also quote Marcus Garvey. Of course, Garvey himself

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is quoting Shakespeare. All of this facilitates how they debate questions of collective identity, citizenship and imperial subjecthood, and political rights. They debate how to transcend individual island-of-origin loyalties, which they label insularity, and at the other end of the spectrum they debate what it means to be part of "the great Negro race."

LJ: This issue of insularity that Lara describes, as well as the historical context of the rise of white supremacy and the collective identification of people marked by their skin colour or their place of origin, brings up a number of debates about public spheres. Most obviously, these points relate to the early backlash against Habermas's idea of the neutral space of public spheres, where people bracket their personal interests.

MW: Can I follow up on this point? The argument about marking theory, what Habermas calls bracketing, is really a privilege of the unmarked. That's the argument for a paper I wrote thirty years ago, and I was worried already that it would lead to kind of a lockdown around identity politics. So in fact, the question for me that the "Publics and Counterpublics" essay was trying to work out is this: given that the bracketed aspect of personality and rationality in the public sphere is social and specific and has all these marking relationships surrounding it, so as to produce the kind of power as though it's a natural effect of physicalness, how is it then possible that those structures can get transformed over time? Or that people who don't have this privilege of going unmarked can in fact secure space for themselves in public discourse.

So that's where I started feeling it was necessary to think about stranger sociability and also this is the point where we started having to think about counterpublics. If there had only been one public then yes, that logic would have led to a lockdown of identities. This is where the issue of Habermas's historical analysis becomes important. In *Structural Transformation*, a major part of the argument is very historically contingent and specific. But Habermas turns, midway through the book, against his own historicism when he says that the public is private persons coming together to make public spheres of influence. So we've had, ever since that moment in *Structural Transformation*, a bifurcation of the conversation that has been partly historical and partly transcendental. And Habermas was charting the path towards the rest of his career where he just abandoned the historicism of his early work. It is that which produces this problem. That is, do we see these bracketing rhetorics and marking relationships as historical or as just structural. And we've spent the last thirty years working that out.

Segregation came up this morning, as did Rudolf Wagner's work on asymmetries.[2] Segregation is the condition of a black counterpublic, where you have a segregated society in which there's an asymmetry of knowledge and recognition—I think the word information might be too small a word here—to describe this asymmetry. So you have conditions whereby Nigerians know more about the United States than the United States knows about Nigeria, and black people know more about white people than white people know about themselves, gay people know more about straight people than straight people know about themselves, and so on. These phenomena of segregation, including the self-selection that means white people have likely never been into black

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churches or gay dance clubs, are the conditions under which things circulate specifically. They circulate within this asymmetry. That is why it was necessary to describe not just a one-size-fits-all semifluid public where every opinion is different from every other opinion in exactly the same way, but, rather, these very structured asymmetries. They are of course all reproduced in practice, which means they change, they're not given in black and white, and they don't last forever. But they are very powerful and they're one of the basic structures of power in a modern society. Because the language that people access has overwritten things like the privilege of rank and office to supply that function of defining a society. And because of that, these apparently free, voluntary, unorganised asymmetries that just arise from the way publics are organised and who pays attention to whom become a major form of power in the modern world. That was the point that speaking in the plural had.

LJ: Are you not also saying, then, that publics or counterpublics are an expression of institutional power?

MW: Well, a kind of power. We can mean different things by institutional. Because the very striking thing about publics is that they are so indefinite that we can be having this conversation and no one knows exactly where one starts and where one stops. That's a critical thing about them and it's one of the things that makes a public different from an army or a church or any form of social belonging of institutionality where you can actually specify what the belonging is. It's that nonspecific belonging that is a very interesting problem to analyse. So publics are not institutional in the sense of those institutions that are about enumerating people and clarifying that language of belonging, but institutional in the sense of how things get into publication, how movies get made, those sorts of things.

LJ: What, then, are the characteristics that distinguish publics and counterpublics?

MW: Publics and counterpublics are not so much a sharp distinction as an attempt to recognise these phenomena of segregation and these asymmetries. But those are dynamic and so every counterpublic is a public. I stressed that in the essay because I was arguing against people in an identity-politics context who wanted to think that what you had was something like, let's say a gay community counterposed against the public. I wanted to insist that no, the way these social formations come into existence is that they are mediated by stranger sociability in various media just as the dominant public is. So every counterpublic is a public. Thus there is an oscillation that you can trace between counter and dominant. Craig Calhoun, in his really excellent book *The Roots of Radicalism,* analyses the labour movement, evangelicalism, and one or two other such movements in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. He shows that they could move back and forth between a counterpublic posture and the presentation of themselves as though they were dominant and in many cases they would become a dominant public. So, these are contextual assessments of power and of asymmetry points.

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KB: Habermas has come up throughout our workshop as the elephant in the room. Well, now Michael has brought the elephant right in front of us, and I want to just comb it.

MW: Toss it some peanuts.

KB: Yes. I'm far from being a Habermas specialist. But reading and rereading *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* over the last twenty-five years has given me some food for thought about West African colonial publics. Now, I completely accept the comments that have been made about how Habermas doesn't actually work for the colonial situations we are talking about, if he even works for eighteenth-century Europe. But there are two strands of Habermas's thinking that I've found very productive for print culture in colonial Lagos. First, the idea of "bracketing" that Michael has just illuminated for us. When eighteenth-century bourgeois "private people" came together as a public in order to bring rational-critical debate to bear on the actions of the state, Habermas says they "disregarded status altogether." That is to say, in this context rank, title, and wealth did not give anyone authority to pronounce on matters of common concern: the only criterion was reason itself. And topics hitherto regarded as off-limits now became open to discussion and criticism. In the same way, participation in the debate was *in principle* open to all. They believed themselves to be transcending particular or sectional interests and exercising reason for the general good. Habermas makes it abundantly clear that *in practice* the bourgeois public sphere was extremely small, made up of an educated minority with sufficient leisure to participate in coffeehouse discussions and read periodicals. He recognises the limitations and class-interested nature of the bourgeois public sphere, but he maintains that although the primacy of disinterested critical reason was not (or not fully) realised in their journals and debates, nonetheless, they had perceived and articulated an ideal of the "human" which is worth hanging onto.

What is interesting for us is that in West Africa—a hundred or a hundred and fifty years later, and, as I've suggested, in fundamentally different social and political circumstances—the educated elite who wrote and published the newspapers, who gave lectures with lantern slides on cultural themes, and who supported literary and debating societies, did earnestly maintain that they were doing so in order to constitute an enlightened public which would serve the general good. That was a really radical, and novel, and interesting idea. An Enlightenment idea. Stephanie Newell has written very illuminatingly about the civic values of the colonial newspapermen in the Gold Coast: their belief that they could speak for the general good, setting aside ethnicity, family, or religion and speaking for progress, civilisation, and collective advancement. Now, the fact that, of course, they couldn't actually do that doesn't detract from the novelty and the radicality of what they were trying to do. They tried to achieve something like "bracketing" in very interesting ways. Stephanie's book *The Power to Name* is all about pseudonymity and anonymity in the West African press: these are ways of bracketing your personal identity and making yourself into a spokesperson who cannot be located as representing a particular group or interest within the community. In the Lagos English-language

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press I've argued that they also did it to some extent by adopting a very lofty, very impersonal tone that was very different from their normal form of communication. This meant that they were attempting to speak at a level which rose above their personal interests.

And I think that even though this kind of "bracketing" did not lead to the triumph of rational-critical discourse or the kind of civil society with which it is associated, it's remarkable that they tried. Particularly because the colonial West African societies I'm talking about were constituted around "big man" structures of patron-client relations. They were based not on convening a public but on recruiting supporters and followers who are bound to you by personal relationships of obligation and debt and gratitude. The fact that this elite was even trying to constitute an idea of a public sphere on the Enlightenment model tells you something about the kind of moment they were living in. I think it is really worth exploring, taking seriously, what people said they were trying to do instead of just dismissing them because we think, well, they couldn't have been serious.

The second little bit of fur on the elephant's coat that I want to comb is this idea of *Öffentlichkeit,* "openness." This is really central to Habermas's account of the constitution of the public sphere: it's not just the idea that the sphere of rational-critical debate was in principle open to all (though in practice not), but also the fact that cultural products had become *available* to public criticism in a new way. Cultural and communicative products become delinked both from calendrical cycles and from aristocratic or monarchical ownership and control. This delinking was the result of commercialisation. Anybody who can afford the price of a theatre ticket can go to see a play; visual art increasingly moves from palaces and manor houses to galleries open to the public; music is no longer predominantly tied to courtly or seasonal festivities, but is performed in concerts all year round. You pay for your ticket—of course only those with means can afford to do so, but the point is that in principle these art forms, which were previously tied to seasonal or ceremonial occasions, become openly accessible to a public.

This idea of cultural forms becoming newly accessible—as commodities—is one that is well worth exploring in the colonial situation, but perhaps with a difference. In the West African context, it's true that some genres previously lodged in the heart of specific social groups came onto the open market: the praise singer who had once been the long-term dependant of an aristocratic patron, for example, had to try to broaden his appeal and attract a wider, paying public once his erstwhile master had lost his economic and political clout. But what seemed to happen more often was not that cultural objects that were formerly owned by a restricted social group then became widely commercially purchasable. What happened, rather, was that a whole lot of new genres were created in order to meet the market that was emerging. That was one of the stimuli for the incredible ferment of new popular cultural forms taking place across the whole of Africa, from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards. I think this idea of a new detachment from both calendrical cycles and entrenched control by patrons or owners—the idea of

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openness and accessibility—could be a key guiding concept in understanding some of the historical developments that we're looking at.

LJ: Lara, your work has considered a number of different genres and popular cultural forms as well. How do you think about the role of different genres and forms for expressing the collectives you work with?

LP: First, I would insist that print circulation is really critically important. This print space in newspapers is viewed *by contributors at the time* as uniquely important to their sense of themselves and to their political possibilities. At the same time, I want to challenge my own emphasis on print as well here. Because, as Cristina Soriano's paper [in this special issue] points out, just because it is through the print world that we see this happening, that does not mean the print world is the only place it is happening or the most important place it is happening. And of course part of what is, in fact, making the newspapers circulate is this social world full of voluntary associations and fraternal societies who rely on print communication, but also create multiple spaces of connection outside of it. The Universal Negro Improvement Association's local chapters, which were circulating the *Negro World*, are simply the most visible example of this. Sports fandom is another arena of public identification and encounter and dialogue. Sports fandom becomes a critical space for talking about island identity versus racialised identities. So it is crucial for me as a researcher to recognise that the space of print is just the most accessible source *to me*, and it is an amazing source that I can work with in detail because I have it in front of me and I can do careful close readings of it. Yet I have to keep reminding myself not to fetishise that and not to presume that just because it is the clay that I, as a historian, have to work with, that it necessarily was the central building block of what was going on.

Another example of nonprint spaces that were important in this era are the spaces built around music and dance. In my book *Radical Moves*, I spent some time trying to explore and understand the performative public created by jazz music and jazz dance and the ways in which that also became a space of self-reflexive circulation and recognition across borders. It is a space in which people are literally summoned onto the dance floor by rhythms—some of them familiar, some of them less so—and in the course of any given band's performance musicians and dancers are playing with sounds and moves that are more local, finding resonance with others that are borrowed or newer. There are the spatialised referents of the foxtrot versus the merengue versus rhumba versus swing versus calypso: different genres that were linked by listeners at the time to places—New York, New Orleans, Cuba, Jamaica—that folks knew firsthand or through relatives' travels. The circulation of records and rhythms and moves create a sense of Afro-modern commonality across the Americas that works in tandem with the print spaces. And meanwhile, in some ways, it is also in tension with them. Because, of course, newspapers are full of denunciations of modern kids running out to dance all the time. As with so many other places, the respectable world of print is self-defining in part in contrast to the lesser respectability of other spaces of public gathering and

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youth culture. For us as scholars, all these are reasons to push back against fetishising print and the newspapers as being uniquely important.

Having said all that, I want to close by rehabilitating the sense that there's something distinct about newspapers. What the studies in this workshop allow us to do is see across local contexts and make comparisons from very different spaces. I was struck, for example, by the visual example of Lachy Paterson's Māori newspaper, *Te Karere o Poneke.* What I was most struck by when I looked at this is that it looks so much like every other newspaper I know from around the British Caribbean. And for a moment I was helpfully struck anew by how odd that is. Every aspect of it, every aspect of the visual style, was replicated in Port Limon, Costa Rica, Port of Spain, and Panama. And then I read the description of what was included in the issue and the exact range of stuff—advertisements for shipping services to the gold fields, for a "lost horse and foal," etc. —could have been found in any of the papers published in the colonial ports that I look at. The exact, characteristic juxtaposition of the very local and the empire-wide, of official and commercial concerns, would appear.

That remarkable universalism of the early twentieth-century newspaper form was, I think, really critical in shaping the meaning of what was written within it. The authors and editors of the newspapers knew this full well, and they played with it and built from the authority it offered.

This brings me back to the collective idioms we have discussed today, the multiple "we"s that are created through different newspapers or in different settings. One thing which is striking in the colonial newspapers I read is that usually when the term "we" is used it is actually for the most impersonal collective. So, "we the Negro race," you read constantly, or "we coloured citizens of empire." But when something much more local and personal is reported on, like the meeting of a civic group or a church activity, it is usually described through third person rhetoric. "The Red Tank Literary and Cultural Society," for example, "met for its debate and the women did this and the men did that." There's an ironic way in which the universalism of the discursive space structured by the genre and the generic expectations of the newspaper allow for the personal to be presented as universal. You can present it in the third person and you get that extra charge of importance, because it is not just you and your friends at the literary society. You are the Red Tank Literary Society doing just the same kind of things—as you can read in the newspaper—that were being done in x, y, z places all around the world. Yet, that also gives a kind of gravity to the ability to say "we the Negro race, this is what we need to do." You can take that intimate form of "we" and spread it out with a much greater discursive power when it is being done in a form whose universality is so visually clear and in every other sense so forceful.

In other words, the discursive space of the periodical press is used to invoke multiple different collectives. Over the course of any given newspaper issue, editors might invoke island-specific collectives, such as Jamaicaness, and the British West Indian nation, and the British Empire.

But, as a final note, not all of the interlinked interwar papers I am describing are fully or simply colonial. The newspapers I find circulating and being quoted by each other

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include papers like the *Barbados Advocate,* the *Labour Leader* in Trinidad, a series of newspapers in Jamaica, which are all published in colonial spaces. But also papers like the *Panama Tribune* and the *Limon Searchlight*, which are published by colonial subjects in republics where they are not subject to things like libel laws. They are not facing some of the constraints that we've been looking at in colonial contexts. Then you also have quotations and exchanges with papers printed in the United States like the *Negro World*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Chicago Defender*, some portion of whose reporters and contributors are actually of British West Indian origin, who are now publishing within the United States.

There is a coloniality to this, but it is in no way the bright dividing line here. What becomes the crucial, continuously affirmed line of identification in the face of white supremacist assault is being part of the population of colour worldwide. Sometimes there are references to the "Negro race" as distinct from other coloured peoples worldwide; other times there are debates about the degree to which "we of the Negro race" are similar to, for instance, the people of India who are suffering under British colonialism. Again, there are different and overlapping collectives being invoked, and there is ongoing debate over the boundaries and consequences of race as well as empire.

MW: Can I just connect your two comments with an example from my own field? A text that I teach fairly often is David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, which was printed before there was a black newspaper and before there was a black-controlled press or a built-in readership for it. So it has a very interesting material history in that it had to be smuggled out. David Walker was a tailor, and he sewed copies into the linings of the clothes of African Americans who were about to travel so that it could be circulated or distributed. And note that it is called an "appeal to the coloured citizens of the world*."* So this rhetoric is already there. Now, it is not anonymous; it is called *David Walker's Appeal*. But, in a way, that is a bracketing rhetoric and it is interesting to me because I think that a lot of what Habermas describes in that Kantian normative language as bracketing is the rhetorical effect of addressing people that you don't know. And that's one thing that print makes possible and some other media make possible that must have felt transformative to people about the way print was used. When you're talking to people you don't know and you have to recruit them into some kind of we, you have adopted an already strange relation to your own identity, and that's what is interestingly transformative. And it is also an appeal, it is an attempt to recruit people into this understanding. It is an attempt to recruit total strangers into this understanding that we are, collectively, the coloured citizens of the world and here's what I think would be in the best interests of the coloured citizens of the world. So, it has all of those classic public sphere dimensions, or public-forming dimensions. But it doesn't yet have a newspaper or an established press or a strong sense of what the geography of this community is. It is just going out into the world. It is that kind of motion outward towards strangers that produces a lot of the rhetorical and political forms of a public. Walker also had a tradition of black preaching to work with, so his ability to address strangers doesn't come out of nowhere. So, I think these dynamics are there throughout the world formed by slavery and it is kind of

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interesting how quickly these public forms get taken, or counterpublic forms as we should say, get taken up.

KB: Can I add another example to this? There's an interesting contrast in colonial Lagos between the English-language papers and those in Yoruba. Though English was obviously spoken all over the world, the Anglophone press in Lagos made it clear they were addressing a small elite coterie of known interlocutors within the city. Nonetheless, they adopted an impersonal, lofty tone as if they were addressing a vast public. The Yoruba papers, by contrast, sought to reach a potential readership of newly literate Yoruba speakers that was extensive and unknown, stretching far inland and into local and regional diasporas. Yet they used forms of address in an insistently personal way. Every single thing in the Yoruba papers of 1920s Lagos was addressed directly to someone. It was not expressed in the third person. Even if you're reporting on a needlework exhibition held at the Racecourse in Lagos, you don't say that Ebun Da Rocha held a successful needlework exhibition at the Racecourse, attended by many people, on such and such a day. You say, "Ebun! Beautiful-complexioned one! More power to your elbow! Your needlework exhibition at the Racecourse was a fantastic success!" Everything is put in the second person. Often, there would be multiple scales and levels of addressee being evoked simultaneously. Experimenting with forms of address was absolutely central to all the newspapers. These complementary strategies—of playing with known readerships as if they were vast impersonal publics on the one hand, and hailing a hinterland of unknown, potential readers with intimate forms of buttonholing on the other—reveal an acute consciousness in these writer-editors of the significance of print in convening new publics through the very act of address—just as Michael describes it in *Publics and Counterpublics*.

LP: Part of what was interesting to me as you were describing the anglophone newspapers of Lagos was to realise how much the editors I study were reading but also misreading the papers whose production you track. Those papers are being read elsewhere, around the British Caribbean, but really lacking the local context. How much does the average person in Trinidad know of what's happening in West Africa? Well, mainly they know what they read in the papers and they know what the white newspapers have to say. But they are very explicitly reading other colonial newspapers for traces of information that can cut against the racist presumptions that they see both in colonial rhetoric and in the imperial press. So there is a weight and importance given to other papers that are being read from colonised places or published by nonwhite editors. This is partly because people are explicitly drawing on those other papers to counter claims being made about coloured people worldwide, or black people worldwide, or about something as specific as the US occupation of Haiti, which is of great interest to the people around the circum-Caribbean. There is almost a subgenre that involves a takedown of clueless white North American newspapers. They do this by printing what some white-run paper or journal says about what's happening in Haiti and then

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printing details from Haitian newspapers, or other newspapers, or local knowledge to prove the ignorance of the white press.

Thus newspapers that are being published around the colonised world are playing a really important role—even though, of course, they're being read out of context. So across a multitude of colonial settings newspapers are being written for a local audience with a set of generic assumptions in mind and a certain kind of local performance and a certain addressivity. But they're actually also being read in other contexts for other purposes, where readers are not the audience for whom the papers are intended.

LJ: And here we come back to the crucial issue of addressivity which Karin raised at the beginning. Why has this been so important for you, Karin?

KB: What I found in the Yoruba-language papers that I study, much more than in the English-language ones, was an absolutely effervescent, exuberant experimentation with hailing the reader. They would draw the reader in by requiring him or her to sing songs, or complete proverbs, or recognise local allusions. But although these statements were in Yoruba, they were actually often directed outwards to what the writers referred to as "the four corners of the world": humanity in general. As if all humanity could read Yoruba, which was extremely intriguing to me. It wasn't that they shifted from one moment to the next. It was, rather, that multiple layers and scales of address were simultaneous. They were nested within each other.

I've found this concept of addressivity, which Bakhtin described as "the quality of turning to someone," a vital help in my attempts to understand how new textual forms took shape in the colonial West African press. Bakhtin said that addressivity is a "constitutive feature of the utterance" (and by "utterance" he meant both written and oral linguistic expressions—as long as they were part of a communicative exchange rather than being, say, unmoored items in a dictionary); without addressivity, "the utterance does not and cannot exist. The various typical forms this addressivity assumes and the various concepts of the addressee are constitutive, definitive features of various speech genres."[3] So, addressivity is a constitutive feature of genre. Now in that case if we are looking at newspapers or pamphlets or other publications, which are experimenting with address, with ways of hailing an audience, we are also looking at the appearance of new genres. You cannot separate them. It's through attending to addressivity that we can trace, and grasp, the nature of significant innovations in form that took place in the colonial print sphere. For instance, the text that is now regarded as the first Yoruba novel emerged in the process of constant press experimentation with new ways of hailing a new potential audience. It wasn't that the author picked up an imported form—the European novel—and then mashed it up and infused it with local content, as some of the simpler versions of postcolonial criticism would have us believe. Rather, in seeking to convene a new public—the emergent constituency of subelites who could read Yoruba but not English—the author, I. B. Thomas, took ongoing press experiments with addressivity even farther than had been done before. He drew on a wide range of textual genres already circulating in Lagos, whether of external or local origin—letters, sermons, hymns, editorials, proverbs,

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popular songs, anecdotes—and combined them into an epistolary confessional narrative that succeeded in its aim of drawing in an avid new Yoruba-language readership.

What I am trying to get at is the way that literary history is always also a social history. Because why were people trying to convene new publics? Well, in this particular example, because there was a need to reach out to new categories of people who had not previously been part of the Lagos public. In the 1920s, the Lagos elite needed to bring in readers of a lower socioeconomic status than themselves to show the colonial government that they had popular support. And they did this by addressing them in Yoruba, because more people could read Yoruba than could read English. Hence the ferment of experiments with addressivity in the Yoruba press, and hence the emergence, in the thick of this experimentation, of a fictional text addressed insistently to Yoruba readers and exploiting every available trick to seize and hold their attention.

So, what I'm getting at is that addressivity, in the way that Bakhtin explained it, becomes one of these tools (like asymmetry) that we can use to pries open lots of different situations and contexts. It's a kind of conceptual tool for opening up questions about how new things in culture come into existence.

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Notes

1 Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres"; Goodman, "Networks of News"; Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics."

2 Wagner, "Asymmetry in Transcultural Interaction."

3 Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," 99.

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