

## Editorial

## Introduction: Cultures of circulation

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**Abstract**

What are cultures of circulation, and how can they be understood in ways that inform critical scholarship and relationships between academic work and public engagement in globalized settings? This introductory article discusses the initial formulation of the phrase in 2002 and describes how the seven articles in this special issue extend its implications 10 years later. We begin by charting some of the key contexts in which the concept has flourished, noting some of the problems and limitations of its use in different disciplines. We then provide an overview of how each article in this issue takes up the dialectics of circulation and the programmatic of culture as practice. We conclude by proposing avenues for further research as well as opportunities for self-reflexive uses of the concept within academic debates and via wider public engagement.

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**1. Introduction**

The title of our special issue, *Cultures of circulation*, has a double meaning. The first is derived from the initial source of our inspiration, the article of the same name by Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma that first appeared in the journal *Public Culture* in 2002. Our adoption – that is, circulation – of this title 10 years after its initial formulation indexes both our homage to its insights and our desire to expand its central observations in novel ways. Lee and LiPuma set out to dislodge the concept of circulation from its traditional analytic frame as a form of transmission or delivery between unidirectional phases of production and consumption in order to recognize it as a dynamic cultural phenomenon in its own right. Rather than conceiving of circulation in terms of the movement of discrete objects, images and people between defined points in space and time, we are encouraged to acknowledge its performative character, its active role in constituting objects and identities and spatiotemporal environments. It is in the process of circulation of cultural forms such as the novel or the financial derivative that such social imaginaries as the nation or the market are created and understood. Circulation is therefore not an effect of global desires but a central actor in global processes and understandings. The essays in this issue begin from these premises.

The second meaning of our title resides in the relationship among the contributors to this issue. We met as members of an academic collective known as NYLON, an Anglo-American research

group based at New York University and the London School of Economics. Founded by Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett, the group's motive force was the desire for "bridge-building" – not only between British and North American scholars and scholarly traditions but also between sociology and cultural studies and what we saw as unproductive divisions between social organization, social action and the production of meaning more generally (Calhoun and Sennett, 2007). Though our objects of attention and methodological axes are highly varied, our interests merge in the explicit focus on culture as practice – "the ways in which social processes are turned by practical activity into cultural forms and in turn inform the improvisation of social practices" (Calhoun and Sennett, 2007, p. 5). We met as graduate students in NYLON and are now professors and professionals ("NYLUMs") working in institutions across the United States, Canada, and Europe. We are indebted to these intellectual roots in terms of both our collective orientation to the study of culture and our commitment to fostering similarly collaborative and interdisciplinary work among our colleagues and students. In some ways (though not in others, as we describe below) we see ourselves and our intellectual coordinates therefore as a "culture of circulation" in our own right.

The articles that make up this issue took shape in a workshop held in Ottawa, Canada in April 2011, in which participants were invited to apply the theme of *Cultures of circulation* to their own work. The articles selected for inclusion here are chosen in part to represent the range of scholarship encouraged by this investigative lens. In its own way, each essay takes as its object of analysis a given cultural form and investigates the conditions regulating this form as it circulates across social space: the moments at which it appears tightly bounded and the moments of its transformation; the contexts that determine its shape and those which repel it; the sites of synthesis with other forms or processes and the sites of disconnection or dislocation. This is an exercise in, as Gaonkar and Povinelli (2003, p. 392) put it, "an almost neurotic attentiveness to the edges of forms as they circulate so that we can see what is motivating their movement across global social space and thus what is attached to them as both cause and excess". We wish to convey how meanings are made in circulation, if sometimes in unforeseen and unintended ways. We explore ways to analyze culture that move away from the hermeneutic tradition – the interpretation of meaning according to the model of the text – towards an understanding of how cultural meaning resides in cultural experience: in conversation, improvisation, and ongoing active invention. This is not to say that we divorce culture from institutional settings or from other means of external or internal coordination. As some of the essays in this issue reveal, it is the specific interaction of cultural forms with their institutional environments that is key to their (mis)recognition. Our focus is on how practical experience meshes with structure and organization. It is about conversation and improvisation and performance, but it is also about how these seemingly diffuse activities get repeated and embedded in institutional settings. Above all it is about avoiding the reproduction of culture as a separate domain, divorced from polity, economy and society.

## 2. Contexts of circulation

In the globally integrated and interconnected world of the 21st century, the notion of circulation – of goods and services, ideas and images, people and pandemics – takes on unprecedented significance. As we move from "the wealth of nations" to the "wealth of networks" (Benkler, 2007; Castells, 1996; Wittel, 2001), scholars and citizens have explored the new forms of access, understanding and engagement such circulatory networks enable; far less attention has been paid to the dynamics of circulation itself as a driving force of global change. The intensification and expansion of circulation in global processes is taken as normal and necessary, evoking Galilean

metaphors of the natural state of objects in motion or the life-affirming homeostatic properties of the human body (Urry, 2007). In perceiving circulation as imperative, progressive and productive, however, we elide vital contradictions in its effects. Some point to how the emphasis on speed and immediacy in circulation leads to frequent states of crisis (Virilio, 1986). Others observe how the seeming freedom to circulate tangible and intangible property is accompanied by the restriction of this circulation in systems and institutions, turning networks into sites of surveillance, protocol and constraint (e.g. Galloway, 2004; Thacker, 2005). Still others focus on the problem of technocratic advocacy of circulation of content as an end in itself rather than an object of social and political judgment or a precondition for active citizenship (Barney, 2007, 2008; Dean, 2005). These structural and regulatory transformations are rooted in cultural conditions. This is why Lee and LiPuma (2002, p. 192) argue that circulation must be rethought as a primarily cultural phenomenon, “with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretive communities built around them”.

Recent work in economic sociology has fostered a provocative rethinking of the concept. Some authors have proposed the need for a new lexicon to account for the social dynamics of market exchange. For example, Knorr Cetina (2003, Knorr Cetina and Bruegger, 2002) has suggested that the social practices that contribute to market coordination are poorly contained in the notion of the network. Whereas networks elicit a vision of relations between established coordinates in defined spaces and times, the metaphor of flow may be more apt to describe the reflexive, disembedded, and globally encompassing character of market realities (see also Lash and Lury, 2007). Flow architectures are “microstructured,” that is, more densely layered than networks, and therefore more able to encompass the multiple (re)presentations of the market. Knorr Cetina’s concept of flow markets includes stories about the market contained in news headlines, conversations among brokers, and traders’ emails that contribute to market organization. The metaphor of “flow” has informed a number of arguments about the performativity of global circulation, from Arjun Appadurai’s characterization of “–scapes” (1996) to John Urry’s (2000) mobilities paradigm and Castells’ (1996) vision of a network society pulsing with “flows of messages and images” (qtd. in Knorr Cetina, 2003, p. 13). Knorr Cetina distinguishes her elaboration of flow from these visions by her emphasis on the actual *practices* of coordination, the continuous assembling and dispersal of practical activity that exceeds the network structure.

Other cultural accounts of economic work underline the insufficiency of the network metaphor to describe the complex and multilayered circuits through which money travels. Studies of earmarking (Zelizer, 1997), national interpretations of foreign direct investment (Bandelj, 2008) and local bartering arrangements (Williams, 1996) reveal the ways in which economic exchange is perpetually cultural. At the same time, a range of studies has emerged to address the obverse relationship: the cultural dimensions of capital itself, which are enforced and extended through its circuits of encounter. Thrift’s (2005) “cultural circuits of capitalism” refer to the transnational traffic of business and management expertise oriented toward the perpetuation of a self-reflexive, “knowing” capitalism that embraces affective and ludic practices as key resource generators. Such cultural circuits are responsible for maintaining capitalist endeavors through the embrace of the so-called experience economy, digital economy or knowledge economy, in which humanistic terms of creativity and innovation are ripe for corporate harvest (see, e.g. Du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Garnham, 2005; Terranova, 2003).

A third set of studies that inform the articles presented here deal with the dynamics that organize the displacement of cultural forms. Here we are drawing on work that addresses the construction of intellectual borders and boundaries, revealing the ways in which the circulation of

concepts can rely, paradoxically, on the construction of obstacles. It is in this sense that we can understand circulation as an “always already” political project: by investigating how boundaries and obstacles are not necessarily overcome but indeed sometimes intentionally made in and by the throughways and byways of circulation.

### 3. Contours of circulation

The articles in this special issue take up these themes in order to contribute to a more fine-grained understanding of the performativity of circulation. Our common concern, as we note above, is the shift of attention from culture as bounded form to culture as constituted in experience. Reorienting our attention in this way brings to light questions about the kinds of interactions, situations, and experiences that constitute cultural forms; and conversely, the ways in which circulation enables some kinds of subjectivity, some kinds of practices, and some kinds of recognition while disabling others (Gaonkar and Povinelli, 2003).

Matthew Gill addresses the humanistic dimensions of this theme in his study of the provision of care to the elderly. Gill’s concern is with the ways that the logic of transaction intersects with the logic of interaction: If the most basic terms of care are by definition noneconomic, how does the provision of care according to principles of economic exchange – an increasingly common reality for a growing population in institutional care settings, but also for noncontractual relations between individuals – compromise caring relationships? Building on work by Hochschild, Zelizer, and Mol, among others, that investigates connections between interpersonal and impersonal circuits of care, Gill troubles conceptions of value in modern Western societies, suggesting that the dependent elderly represent a limit case to consider problematic dimensions of market exchange.

Noah McClain and Ashley Mears focus on the ritual component of exchange in the distribution of “free stuff” – from the availability of napkins and condiments in fast food restaurants to corporate perks lavished on executives. As McClain and Mears demonstrate, free goods circulate not via motives of availability, altruism, or even savvy marketing, but through complex networks of expectation. In this sense the circulation of free goods is more akin to the logic of gift exchange (per Mauss, 1954) than to that of rationalized market transaction by self-interested parties (see also Berking, 1999; Lash and Lury, 2007, pp. 136–140; Miller, 2000). The provision of free gifts is always about establishing relationships – drug companies to doctors, luxury goods makers to celebrities, businesses to their employees – that entail a kind of contractual obligation in return. More complex still is the way in which the circulation of free stuff works to reinforce social stratification, as an affordance of privilege to some and a barrier to others. Their study suggests that attending to circulation also requires attentiveness to the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that structure circulatory processes – an insight that takes on special meaning in the context of “new economy” paradigms, where relationships become valuable in economic terms (Thrift, 2005).

A different kind of giving is described in McGoe’s discussion of “philanthrocapitalism”: benevolent acts aimed at promoting the well being of others combined with the benefactor’s desire to maintain or grow her own financial wealth – not to mention the “well being” of the capitalist system. Such “creative capitalism,” as its supreme proponent Bill Gates terms the practice, establishes a set of relations that belies its self-reflexive image as a virtuous cycle of beneficial cause and effect. If the causal logic of philanthrocapitalism is contained in the mantra, “Doing good while doing well,” the effect is to reinforce the same versions of economic inequality and social stratification that obtain in McClain and Mears’ account. Patterns of

exclusion and inclusion equally reveal themselves here, as the rhetorical justification of philanthrocapitalism as a way to bring needy populations into a donor's ambit serves at once to link them to a cycle of expectation and to legitimate the position of extreme wealth that enables donors to give large sums of money "freely" – a position that the recipients of such largesse are never expected to attain. By demonstrating how the phenomenon ties the market to ideas of social justice and social responsibility, McGoey introduces moral considerations into an understanding of the workings of circulation. Twinning money with morals in a justification of competitive growth and profit, philanthrocapitalism reinforces ways of giving (and living) that reinforce problematic divides. Such phenomena remind us of the contingencies of circulation: its potential to manifest as uneven, partial, or laden with obstacles.

Will Davies, like McGoey, interrogates the moral foundations of economic principles of value in his outline of a sociology of ownership. Davies sets out to show how the monolithic categories of public and private are treated differently in the discipline of economics than in that of sociology. The different claims made about them and the different ways they are made to mean reveal that these seemingly stable and bounded vessels are "never simply empirical and theoretical but instead normative and critical, arising out of conflicting philosophies of how boundaries should and should not be drawn in economic life" (see the second page of Davies' article in this issue). In other words, "public" and "private" are cultural forms in themselves. Treating them as such requires recognizing how the boundaries of the terms depend on their relationship to disciplinary context. It is not only about the translation of these forms but rather their "transfiguration" as they move in and out of disciplinary worlds (Gaonkar and Povinelli, 2003).

Similar concerns over the ruthlessness of binary oppositions animate Olga Sezneva's contribution to this issue. Sezneva inserts her study into the vast gap between the institutional organization of intellectual property – its "legal" framework – and the actual conditions of its practice – its so-called illegal activities. As Sezneva's research suggests, it is the categorical distinction between legal and illegal in the construction of piracy that forms the prelude to the problem. Tracking the circulation of pirated CDs in Russia, Sezneva determines that pirated media markets are not distortions of well functioning market structures; rather they are coconstitutive cultural forms, with the practices of each articulating the (shifting) boundaries of the other. A second binary projected onto the notion of piracy is its separate determinations in "established" versus "emerging" markets, with the practices and principles of the former taking the moral high ground over the latter. Combining an analysis of institutional alliances, social forces, and cultural-judicial codes, Sezneva shows that meanings of il/legality are highly charged forms that shift as they circulate in different local contexts.

The political dynamics of circulation offer one explanation for why sociological "facts" travel poorly, as Michael Guggenheim and Monika Krause explore in their article on the absence of a defined circulatory system in sociological practice. The discipline of sociology lacks the language of exemplars – a taxonomy to determine what the objects it is studying are "kinds of." Unlike biology's ubiquitous fruit fly, a stable and reproducible object of study in laboratories throughout the world, sociology does not claim its own "model systems" as part of its work. Yet, as Guggenheim and Krause argue, model systems play a critical role in sociology, particularly in the organization of sociological subfields. *Drosophila* are to genetics research what Chicago is to urban studies, car factories to organizational sociology and the French Revolution to historical – comparative sociology. By not recognizing its use of standardized research objects, sociology misses opportunities to develop productive circuits of research. The logic of accumulation that informs model systems research in biology – pooling research so as to integrate various insights and findings – is replaced in

sociology by logics of coverage (“I study X because no one else has studied it before”), representativeness (“I study X because it is representative of Y”) or application (“What is true in X will likely be true in Y”). Using metaphors of neglect and differentiation rather than accumulation and aggregation compromises sociology’s potential to circulate comparable, generalizable and relatable research and findings.

Problematic metaphors and their political dynamics form the object of Marion Wrenn’s study as well. Tracking the concept of the audience through news accounts of popular rallies, Wrenn discovers a contest of legitimacy and a struggle over the reins of both political representation and mainstream journalism. Wrenn considers how the media’s use of the term “fan” to describe viewers of the satire news shows *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* reveals a tendency by journalists to discount the political potential of popular engagement – a dismissal brought about at least in part by mainstream journalists’ ambivalence over the rise of satire TV as a bona fide source of news. For Wrenn, such ambivalence speaks to the contemporary context of debate over the future of traditional news outlets and their agents’ “persistent panic” over the boundaries between traditional journalism and new forms of citizen engagement.

#### 4. Conclusion

In their own collection of essays addressing circulation, [Boutros and Straw \(2010, p. 4\)](#) observe how, “with time, ‘circulation’ came to assume even greater prominence within a shared theoretical vocabulary. In particular, it named a point at which many of the key intellectual influences on our work seemed to converge and address each other”. The effect has been similar here. In juxtaposing our diverse intellectual concerns in the context of this special issue of *Poetics*, we discovered a range of common issues that through their multiplication present themselves as avenues for further research and reflection.

One provocative line of inquiry extends to the ways in which the metaphor of circulation can be used to trouble the problematic notion of the network. The power of metaphors lies precisely in their ability to simultaneously perform different tasks as they circulate in different contexts and to act as vessels of circulation for larger social imaginaries. It is only through detailed and dedicated attention that we can extract the meanings embedded within them as they enact diverse functions at multiple scales and scopes. Another avenue for investigation is to empirically account for the regimes of inclusion and exclusion that obtain in circulation. Part of the problem lies in their misrecognition as exceptions or obstacles to circulation rather than as constitutive elements.

One additional dimension bears mention. In their focus on the globalization of capitalism, Lee and LiPuma offer an account of speculative markets that shows how circulation is joined by notions of self-reflexivity and exchange to constitute problematic activities and subjectivities: relationships understood in terms of anachronism, differentiation, and risk aggregation. Our aim here is to channel the interaction of circulation, self-reflexivity and exchange in more hopeful directions. Rather than simply identifying some of the “dangerous” tendencies of circulation – the potential for exclusion, or the strategic or unconscious imposition of obstacles – one possibility is to reflexively and pragmatically apply such lessons to our own work. Seeing culture as practice provides a perspective to inform both cultural research and the capacity for stronger cultures of researchers. This in turn raises the possibility of widening the interpretive communities of academic discovery. By this we mean not simply overcoming the disciplinary or institutional boundaries that continue to inform the questions we ask in our work – though as some of the essays in this issue suggest, the need to dispel such boundaries is pressing – but also



in terms of the potential of engagement with broader publics. Our hope is that the ideas contained in this issue continue to move and be transformed within and beyond their circuitry.

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