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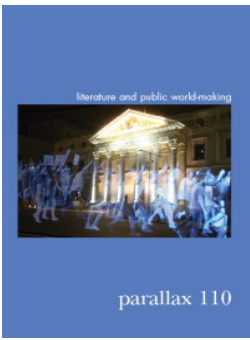
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Literature and Public World-Making: Introduction

Marco de Waard , Maria Boletsi , Marc Farrant  and
Divya Nadkarni 

Literature and Public World-Making

As we were writing this introduction in the late spring of 2024, the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands – where the four of us are based – witnessed a short-lived encampment named after Walid Daqqa, the Palestinian author who died as a prisoner in Israeli custody in April 2024. The fated Walid Daqqa Campus at Amsterdam’s Science Park – it was evicted within a day – joined the Memorial Library named after Daqqa at previous encampments at the University of Edinburgh and Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art in the UK, just as it joined Refaat Alareer Memorial Libraries at several universities in the US, set up in honour of a poet and scholar who was killed by Israeli soldiers in December 2023.¹ In each of these examples, a commemorative makeshift infrastructure was improvised in the context of a solidarity and protest movement that is now clearly global. The international wave of encampments uses commemorative naming as part of the protest repertoire: it is one of the ways in which protesters are looking to pre-figure another, better world – one that would include Palestinian liberation and the end to the genocidal violence unleashed on Gaza in the context of the current Israel–Hamas war. It is notable that the commemorative effort centres on literary authors, with literary ‘names’ being recruited to support and amplify some of the other forms of political meaning-making through which Palestinian solidarity gets expressed.² In our terms here, the references made to Daqqa and Alareer point up the value of literature in the formation of – not only publics, but also, or better – *counterpublics*: as protesters of various stripes come together, inscribing themselves into a process of literary circulation that moves online and offline, across linguistic and nation-state borders, they assert themselves as a (counter)public that is at once political and literary and acts in tension with hegemonic discourses and norms.³

Literature and Public World-Making was conceived well before the start of the present crisis in the Middle East and the many (campus) protests and Palestinian solidarity actions which we have seen worldwide. However, while we could not have foreseen the current crisis, let alone its depth and scale, one aspect of it has strongly come to resonate for us with a line of enquiry that was already set out at the Ravenstein Winter School 2022, hosted by the Netherlands Research School for Literary Studies, in which this special issue has its origin.⁴ In a nutshell, this strand of our research is concerned with the ways in which literary production, reception and circulation are caught up in,

registering or otherwise responding to the transformations of publicness which transpire as our societies are seeing new levels of polarisation and division, increasing pressures on notions and practices of free speech (and on democratic participation and debate more broadly), as well as the ongoing mutation of neoliberal forms of rule – now often working in conjunction with an authoritarian populism of the right. In neoliberalism, as has been widely analysed, the threat to public life is not just posed by the privatisation of so much of it (schools, parks, roads); it is also posed by the privileging of market-orientated (i.e. private or self-interested) freedoms at the cost of public and political freedoms in the (re-)conception and refashioning of citizenship – a development that, as different political theorists have shown, erodes the very foundations of a vibrant democratic culture.⁵ The excessive police violence used against protesters, in Amsterdam as elsewhere, is one stark indication that today's public realm is increasingly inhospitable to the rights to protest and assembly. Another is the weaponisation of liberal values such as free speech itself to promote only the narrowest interpretation of it, potentially to censor protest as a 'mode of public speech' in its own right.⁶ But while the protests bring into focus how contemporary public-sphere vicissitudes pervade the university, where they show in intensified form,⁷ the literary referencing in this context also highlights the world-making powers of (counter)publics as they take charge of the public and discursive spaces in which they self-organise and appear. It is these world-making powers which this issue aims to explore and, in principle, to affirm.

For our purposes here, we should stress that 'public' and 'publicness' mean several things at once within this line of enquiry. As Bruce Robbins puts it, the term 'public' is marked by 'referential indefiniteness' – which may well be one of its strengths.⁸ As is well known, the term has long been associated with the Habermasian concept of the public sphere as that 'institutionalised arena of discursive interaction' which is distinct from any state apparatus and, indeed, may facilitate a critical function vis-à-vis the state.⁹ It is also associated with publicity as the medium of such forms of discursive interaction and exchange – 'publicity' resonating with late-Enlightenment notions of transparency, but also with the kinds of free circulation of news and information that are part of contemporary mediascapes. In light of these associations, 'public' as an adjective qualifies the range of specific spaces and settings where such interactions transpire, while 'public' as a noun stands for the social or cultural 'form' that congeals when such exchanges bring people together, whether as citizens or as otherwise situated subjects.¹⁰ 'Publicness' is the catch-all phrase we use here to foreground the spectrum of spaces and settings where contemporary public spheres materialise, and also to denote the modes or styles in which they are inhabited and in which public and political freedoms are not just exercised in a formal or institutional sense but experienced and *lived*. In this broad sense, 'publicness' retains some of the aspirational character of the public sphere concept itself (if we take it back to Habermas's *Öffentlichkeit*, it qualifies as a substitute translation). But if in Habermas's early work, as

has been much discussed, this concept seemed strongly normatively encoded, and often homogenising and exclusive in its presuppositions or effects,¹¹ our approach dovetails with those critical revisions, reworkings and alternative theorisations and traditions that stress the essential multiplicity of publics, as well as the need to think beyond a ‘liberal-bourgeois’ model of the public sphere to allow for a more thoroughly democratised conception of it – one that would recognise questions of access and inclusion as being irreducible to formal equality of rights.¹²

Literature and its study have much to offer by way of insight into publicness, understood in this encompassing way. From Michael Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics* to Elaine Hadley’s *Living Liberalism* and Bonnie Honig’s *Public Things*, scholarly engagements with literature (and film) have long been productive in generating approaches to the public realm that attend to questions of language, rhetoric and genre, to affect and embodiment, and to literary and cultural production as coextensive with public infrastructures or as ‘infrastructural’ in themselves (all points to which we return).¹³ In the process, they have also done much to highlight how contestation of the boundaries and exclusions of existing public spheres is part of their actual life and functioning; how a transformative, indeed a self-transforming, potential is intrinsic to the public realm on account of the ‘porousness, outer-directedness, and open-endedness of publics’;¹⁴ and how publics, seen in terms of their identities and interests, are not so much ‘given exogenously’, as Nancy Fraser puts it, but are constituted – or even self-constituting – in and through the forms and practices of their self-representation.¹⁵

This issue builds on such work while extending it in new directions, among others by looking outside the Anglosphere, and by situating new readings and analyses in the conjuncture of our time. To help promote the transformative potential for which ‘world-making’ is our shorthand, we critically enquire into how public-sphere narratives and images are mediated: meaning that we attend to the narrative forms, speech genres, cultural scenes, and fantasies and vocabularies of citizenship (or social membership) through which a public sphere makes itself intelligible to itself; but also, and in equal measure, that we ask what falls outside them, how and why *counterpublics* arise as and when they do, and what is at stake when a dominant public-sphere narrative solidifies in one way rather than another.¹⁶ In the process, the emphasis placed here on today’s conjuncture does not preclude that we go back in time. We approach the (late-)neoliberal present in an extended temporality which helps to place today’s vicissitudes in a new light – historicising them, recontextualising them, and bringing to bear sometimes unexpected philosophical and literary voices.¹⁷ As the questions pursued in common in this issue are driven by concern with how brittle or besieged public world-building powers so often are (or look), the hope is that a historical perspective might give nourishment to some of the struggles with the world-breaking forces that mark our time.

In what follows, we lay out a broad and present-orientated framework for analysing ‘literature and public world-making’ in their various interrelations. The aim is to indicate some of the ways in which dialogue between political and critical theory, public-sphere theory, and literary and cultural studies can help promote possibilities for public empowerment and progressive action. In the process, we interrelate – and mutually situate – the accounts that are offered in this issue of forms of (counter)public participation, visibility and exchange as seen through literary texts, and we identify points of convergence between the contributions. Inevitably, each of the essays brought together here engages with the shared questions in its own way – reflecting the authors’ own conceptual and methodological choices and orientations, deriving from different theoretical and intellectual traditions and commitments. But while our framework is broad and eclectic, we each stress public life as *public-political* life, meaning that we give accounts of publicness that affirm the public domain as the terrain for active forms of citizenship and political participation, including democratic contestation, protest and debate.¹⁸ Of course, the agency of publics can never be taken for granted; it cannot be assumed to be just ‘there’; and we certainly should not trust that the agency of publics is invariably progressive. Yet the fundamental openness of publics qua ‘cultural form’ always holds out at least a *promise* of situated agency. Rebecca Solnit has captured this well in calling ‘the public’ a ‘sleeping giant’: ‘when it wakes up, when we wake up, we are no longer only the public: we are civil society, the superpower whose nonviolent means are sometimes [...] more powerful than violence, more powerful than regimes and armies’.¹⁹ Much hinges on the ‘sometimes’ in this sentence, for Solnit recognises all too well just how the power of publics can be confined to specific, even isolated moments in time; yet the sentiment does justice to how publics may self-empower through the forms of their self-assertion.

Theories and Imaginaries of Publicness

Literature and Public World-Making looks into an extended contemporary moment where the world-making capacity of publics and counterpublics – their ability to take charge of the worlds they have in common – may look brittle in the face of ecological degradation, resurgent authoritarianisms, and neoliberal and populist efforts to underfund, and indeed to undermine, many of the infrastructures of public life. We ask how literature is involved in these ongoing transformations of publicness; how we may track and study the forms and terms of its response; and how literature is reshaping its public role and function in different contexts across the globe. In the process, we also enquire into how, and to what extent, literature can be seen to assert its freedom or even a radical autonomy vis-à-vis the heteronomous pressures of exclusionary, often inhospitable public spheres. The range of approaches to the question of publicness that have found resonance and uptake in the literary and theoretical humanities is broad, and it has diversified considerably in the last ten to fifteen years. We do not aim to give an exhaustive survey here, or to round out a narrative on the existing scholarship on public spheres, in

history and theory. Rather, we highlight a number of influences and interlocutors that resonate with the essays assembled in this issue and which speak to the present moment, whether directly – in the mode of conjunctural analysis – or by means of a detour through the past. Starting with the notion of ‘world-making’ itself, our framework places much emphasis on literature in relation to the essentially mediated character of public life.

Our shared concern with publicness and world-making has many resources to point back to, but among the most influential in recent years is surely the work and legacy of Hannah Arendt, most especially when read in an agonistic vein. Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics* – a recurrent reference point in this special issue – revisited Arendt quite prominently in its opening essay to argue for the relevance of her thought in analysing *counterpublics*, with special attention going to the modes of agency which such publics achieve when they form scenes or frameworks of association and interaction.²⁰ Reading Arendt at the start of her ‘rediscovery’ by feminist thinkers in the late 1990s, and interested in how publics may come together in tension with – or at a distance from – hegemonic forms of publicness, Warner found in *The Human Condition*’s treatment of public space something of a counterpoint to the Habermasian public-sphere model. In the early Habermas, as Warner recalls, a strong emphasis was placed on the unitary nature of ‘the’ public, even if Habermas understood this unitary character as a kind of public self-ideal – a motivating fiction, if you will.²¹ Arendt in contrast provides a theorisation that emphasises both the essential plurality of publics and their horizontal character: public life, for her, transpires in the space *between* people as they come together to ‘act in concert’; their plurality, which is ontologically given, is expressed in doing so. The ongoing wave of interest in Arendt continues to think through these themes and ideas, finding in her conception of public space an evaluative standard for considering ‘public freedom’ and its worldly realisation.²² If, drawing on this reception, we approach the public-political realm as a transformative space where human plurality gets actualised, it is to show world-making powers as proceeding from people who form publics in various ways, on different scales, and in different relations of situatedness towards culturally dominant norms and images of public life.

Where Warner does see Arendt’s approach to public space as limited (and limiting) is in its neglect of mediation: of how ‘world making unfolds in publics that are, after all, not just natural collections of people, not just “communities,” but *mediated* publics’ [our emphasis].²³ On one level, we might add, this neglect is simply consequent to how Arendt modelled her idea of the public realm on the ancient space of the *polis* – a space where public ‘action’ is comprised of political words and deeds in the context of an assembly. Indeed, as one of her readers has put it, Arendt ‘thinks about the problem of politics from the ground up, as it were’: ‘as highly dynamic, local, and context-dependent conversations and actions rather than as expressions of large institutional structures, instruments, or forces of history’.²⁴ On another level, however, to downplay the role of mediation would severely

restrict our appreciation of the possibilities for agency and self-organisation that accrue for people by virtue of media and their affordances. As *Publics and Counterpublics* amply demonstrates, publics' world-making powers may be traced through the rhetorical and stylistic forms that inform their self-reflexiveness, such as the modes of address which invite members of a public to self-identify as such. More broadly, literature is key to understanding how self-images of publics and public spheres (such as self-referential, even self-authorising evocations of 'public opinion') can be constitutive of political and social imaginaries, or of what one of us has recently sought to conceptualise as 'imaginaries of publicness'.²⁵ Perhaps most influential in Warner, above all, is his emphasis on the openness of publics qua 'cultural form', including the ways in which they accommodate 'stranger sociability'. For Warner, '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'.²⁶ It is these qualities of reflexivity and openness which Warner's approach to 'mediated publics' works to uphold.

Arguably, aspects of Arendt's thought also resonate with the 'infrastructural turn' in the theoretical humanities and social sciences, even though the influence is not often direct. With 'infrastructure' emerging as a new 'theory-metaphor to do new kinds of analytic work',²⁷ affording special attention for 'the simultaneous world-making and world-breaking functions of infrastructures', Arendt's work on the interrelations between political 'action' on the one hand and the cultural and material conditions that may support (or undermine) such action on the other appears pertinent in new ways.²⁸ Honig's *Public Things* is a case in point. Appraising not only Arendt's 'action' category but also her account of 'work' – the work that builds public infrastructures, and on which political practices, in turn, rely – Honig argues that 'public things' such as schools, libraries or bridges are not just there *in support of* but are fully *integral to* our experience of publicness, as they 'press us into relations with others' and 'are sites of attachment and meaning that occasion the inaugurations, conflicts, and contestations that underwrite everyday citizenships and democratic sovereignties'.²⁹ Furthermore, as Honig reworks Arendt through insights from child psychology about how attachments are formed and sustained, she proposes that 'we may think about public things as constituting a kind of *democratic holding environment*, a laboratory for citizenship in which we experience lifelong the attachments and play that form and re-form all of us into individuated and resilient persons', capable of 'concern' for others and for our environments [original emphasis].³⁰ Honig's invitation to consider 'public things' in this democratically consequential way is taken up in this issue by Monique Roelofs, while Laura Bieger's essay participates in the infrastructural turn by highlighting the infrastructural 'promise' that literature holds out on account of its aesthetic affordances.

Alongside the influence of new critical engagements with Hannah Arendt, we also want to acknowledge here the rich body of critical writing on neoliberalism and its ramifications for politics and culture, including what many writers

identify as a dynamic of depoliticisation at work in neoliberal public spheres. One prominent theorist in this regard is Chantal Mouffe – someone who, like Arendt, is strongly invested in thinking about plurality *outside* the liberal tradition. Mouffe’s diagnosis of the ‘post-political’ condition, first offered at a much earlier point in the neoliberal era, continues to influence assessments of the resurgence of right-wing and populist politics and how they transform landscapes of democratic publicness today, as does her appraisal of the role of affect in public-political life (or what she insists on calling ‘passions’).³¹ In neoliberal post-politics, properly political debates and decisions are taken out of public life – or discursively sidelined – as they are relegated to technocrats and experts. All sense of choice evaporates. The notion that ‘there is no alternative’, to echo Margaret Thatcher, forecloses political space, notably around issues of equality and social justice. One of the problems with this for Mouffe, apart from the clear effect of de-democratisation, is that it leaves political passions unacknowledged and dissatisfied; political passions need forms of identification and political ‘ownership’, which, if lacking, make way for public feelings of anger, enmity or resentment.

Several essays in this issue converge on the sense of public spheres as shrinking, eviscerated or exhausted, and on the attendant question of how democracy might be revitalised (or radicalised) as something emerging from the people, the ‘demos’, as they are looking to rebuild some form of public life. In doing so, these essays are mindful that our current era of post-politics is not entirely that of the 1990s and early 2000s, when Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, Colin Crouch and others all started to speak of post-politics or ‘post-democracy’ in the context of a critique of neoliberal globalisation and technocracy.³² Yet, they are equally mindful that we are still in a continuum with this older moment; neoliberal depoliticisation goes on, even as new right-wing populisms come to us wearing the face of a *re*politicisation of public life.

On this last note, Robin Celikates has recently suggested that the alleged ‘return’ of politics into contemporary public spheres may rather need to be understood, in many instances, in terms of ‘pseudo-politicisation’ on account of its association with illiberal or anti-democratic forces.³³ This issue pays heed to such scepticism, while staying attentive to the rich spectrum of political practices and subjectivities which (may yet) manifest in public-political life. We are thus cautious here in endorsing the sweeping periodising narrative that so easily accompanies observations about the current retreating of post-politics. Political theorist Anton Jäger, commenting on what he dubs the ‘hyper-political’ forms of political action, protest and participation that run from Occupy to Black Lives Matter – forms that he faults for their loose organisational structures – has recently opined:

The public sphere has been repoliticized and re-enchanted, but on terms which are more individualistic and short-termist, evoking the fluidity and ephemerality of the online world. This is an

abidingly 'low' form of politics – low-cost, low-entry, low-duration, and all too often, low-value.³⁴

As a descriptive observation this surely resonates with many experiences of publicness or pseudo-publicness today. Yet in proclaiming post-politics to be 'past', Jäger's narrative may well stay rather too close to what it purports to leave behind, while at the same time risk depriving itself of analytical tools with regard to the ongoing rapprochement between technocracy and populism which increasingly infuses (so-called) liberal democracies with anti-democratic and authoritarian currents.³⁵ Furthermore, while we recognise that the notion of hyper-politics gives conceptual focus to emergent phenomena in today's public spheres, we venture that the new public-sphere narrative which it projects cannot stand in for other, differently engaged (counter)publics and the experiences and practices through which their world-making unfolds. The latter may be characterised by rather more long-term temporalities of actualisation and transmission than is recognised if we only stress fleetingness and atomisation; and they may well be fighting against a post-political dynamic that infiltrates public spheres from state level downwards, as opposed to being an internal public-sphere growth.³⁶

This issue stays broadly aligned, then, with diagnoses of the post-political foreclosure of public, democratic spaces that avoid mono-linear narratives or characterisations; at the same time, it is concerned to focus on forms and modalities of *counterpublicness* in their diversity and range. Two more strands of debate merit acknowledgment here, albeit briefly. First of all, we mention Wendy Brown's influential work on the relative fate of *homo economicus* versus *homo politicus* – her thesis about how the latter has been eclipsed by the former in many spheres of life offering another assessment of neoliberalism's depoliticising logic, with special emphasis on its transformation of subjectivity.³⁷ In Brown's critique of liberalism and neoliberalism alike – and she understands these two paradigms as intersecting each other – 'freedom conceived as an individual holding and exercised as personal choice elides the world-making powers through which we are shaped, burdened, and constrained'.³⁸ Such a critique has proved highly resonant for literary studies, where the model of *homo economicus* – or, in a different jargon, the entrepreneurial subject – has been explored in different facets through an array of literary and cultural texts.³⁹ Brown's work on neoliberal subjecthood recurs here in Marc Farrant's essay, where, by way of an excursus on 'repressive desublimation', it guides the analysis of 'unmarked' white masculinity in Ben Lerner's novel *The Topeka School*.

Lastly, alongside critical work on neoliberal subjectivity, it is important to stress recent engagements with the question of affect, already mentioned in reference to Chantal Mouffe. Attending to public affects feels more necessary than ever in this era of authoritarian populism and (new) fascism – the latter not just functioning ideologically but also as a 'libidinal' phenomenon, to speak with Alberto Toscano.⁴⁰ At the same time, and more broadly, studying

affect seems relevant in light of the increasingly volatile environments proffered by contemporary political mediascapes. Bonnie Honig has spoken, in this context, of the inducement of ‘sensorial precarity’: ‘[s]hock politics’ of the kind she associates with the rise of Donald Trump ‘means [that] those empowered by the current political moment work to deprive the public of fixed or stable points of orientation and then flood the public’s senses with stimuli such that we are overwhelmed, desensitized, and disoriented, left nearly incapable of response or action’.⁴¹ It is in no small part in response to such public-sphere developments that the turn to affect (theory) in the literary and theoretical humanities has become integral to critical enquiry into the cultural organisation and lived experience of public life. Work in this field includes, among others, Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, which memorably regards a public sphere as an ‘affect world’.⁴² Affect as it is understood here, as something historically and culturally mediated, offers another way into the questions of mediation that concern us throughout this issue. We now reframe these questions in a perspective on world-making that takes shape through theory of fiction.

Fictions of the Real

Fictional hypotheses about the world are not forever confined within a given fictional genre. Since their circulation involves the entire cultural space, theory of fiction cannot be isolated from the general economy of the imaginary.

Thomas Pavel⁴³

Thomas Pavel’s claim propounded in his classic 1989 study *Fictional Worlds* provides an apt preamble for our exploration of literature’s role in public world-making. Against the grain of the shrinking and marginalisation of the humanities, and of literary studies in particular, we claim that theories of fiction are indispensable not only for understanding and studying literature, but also for coming to terms with our crisis-ridden contemporary. By projecting literature as a world-making force, we acknowledge it as an agent in the production of science, knowledge, thinking and every aspect of our reality⁴⁴ – an agent, to borrow Kate Marshall’s words, that has a key role to play ‘in the conceptual work of the present’.⁴⁵ This acknowledgment, however, does not yet say much about the *mode* of literature’s relation to what we may (somewhat catachrestically) call the ‘real world’ or about the terms and conditions that govern this relation: probing the terms of this engagement is a venture that the essays in this issue undertake in diverse ways.

Literature’s relation to the ‘real world’ and its involvement in public world-making has long been debated (and questioned). Reproducing this debate, which is as old as Plato’s *Republic*, is beyond the scope of this introduction. Nevertheless, to set the terms for the exploration of this relation in our issue, it is useful to briefly revisit the antagonism between ‘segregationist’ and ‘integrationist’ approaches to the relation between fiction and reality, which

Pavel also discusses in his above-mentioned study. Simply put, the segregationist approach, exemplified by (early) analytical philosophy, adopts a distinction between ‘normal’ or ‘serious’ versus ‘marginal’, ‘parasitical’ or ‘nonserious’ types of communication, placing fictional texts in the latter category as mere imitations or citations of ‘serious’ communication or products of imagination without truth value.⁴⁶ Integrationists, by contrast, generally see no absolute ontological distinction ‘between fictional and nonfictional descriptions of the actual world’.⁴⁷

Exposing the logocentric bias of the segregationist position (as articulated particularly by J. L. Austin and John Searle), Jacques Derrida famously revisited the assumed non-seriousness and parasitic character of fiction and literature in his ‘Signature, Event, Context’ to claim that the ‘parasitic’, citational character of fiction is not a deviance or anomaly but a general rule underlying all ‘serious’ communication. For a ‘serious’ utterance to be recognisable as such, it has to be based on imitation of previous similar utterances or formulas; the imitation or iterability that typify fiction are thus a condition that makes any ‘serious’ form of communication possible.⁴⁸ By acknowledging literature’s constitutive function in, and inextricability from, the social world, Derrida does not eclipse literature’s *difference* from ‘serious’ discourses. As he claimed in his interview with Derek Attridge, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’, what sets literature as an institution apart from others is its freedom to ‘say everything’ (‘tout dire’) ‘in every way’ [original emphasis].⁴⁹ This freedom – which Derrida associates with democracy – gives it the power to ‘defy or lift the law’ and in so doing, ‘to think the essence of the law’.⁵⁰ Derrida notes, however, that literature’s freedom, from which it draws its force to intervene in the public sphere, has two sides to it: it is a ‘powerful political weapon but one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as a fiction. This revolutionary power can become very conservative’.⁵¹ Literature’s potential to co-shape or intervene in sociopolitical realities can be dampened precisely due to its assumed fictional, ‘non-serious’ status. This risk makes literature’s contribution to public world-making precarious, unpredictable, even potentially dangerous, but for that reason also potentially transformative and emancipatory: it is the latter potential that most contributions in this issue try to tease out, while also taking heed of its undersides and limitations.

Despite their continuing relevance, the above debates on literature’s function in the world belong to the second half of the twentieth century and are inevitably reflective of the theoretical and philosophical trends and the shifting sociopolitical climate of those decades. What are the terms of the debate now, in the twenty-first century? While the claim that literature holds world-making potential would still be rather easy to ‘sell’ to a crowd of literary scholars, the belief in the power of narrative in general, and of literature in particular, to help people come to terms with contemporary realities seems to be waning in recent years. From the late 1990s to the present, many literary and cultural studies scholars and philosophers have been detecting a ‘crisis of

imagination' or 'crisis of narration', tracing various reasons for this: among others, the multiple scales of the intersecting crises of our times, crowned by the climate emergency, the highly precarious public sphere shaped under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, or the complex landscape shaped by new media, AI and technological advancements.⁵² In *The Great Derangement*, for example, Amitav Ghosh questioned current literature's ability to come up with forms that can adequately capture the climate crisis, which, according to Ghosh, resists narrativisation. Rebecca Solnit has recently expressed her frustration at the proliferation of 'doom-soaked stories' 'about how civilisation, humanity, even life itself, are scheduled to die out', seeing such stories as part of a 'narrative failure' that stems from 'the inability to imagine a world different than the one we currently inhabit'.⁵³ Although Solnit (among many others) resists this tendency and invites alternative narratives, Mark Fisher's well-known diagnosis of the contemporary condition as an anti-utopian 'capitalist realism' – whereby '[c]apitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable' and precludes the imagination of alternatives – still seems to hold sway and to affect the literary field as well.⁵⁴

If many see contemporary literature as part of the assumed failure of imagination in the face of a present of omnicrisis, one could ask: *which* literature – or, perhaps, which *genre*? In their above-mentioned *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant detects a general 'waning of genre', and especially of 'realist genres whose conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life'.⁵⁵ Reflecting on Berlant's 'eulogy for realism' in his *Transscalar Critique*, Henry Ivry argues that contemporary realities of intersecting crises are 'in excess' of realist imaginaries: realism, Ivry notes, echoing Berlant, is no longer a 'tenable mode of representing the economic, material, ecological, and affective realities' of our world.⁵⁶ To be sure, despite the current critiques of realism that stress its limitations when it comes to capturing the contrasting scales and disorienting experience of transversal crises today, realism remains the dominant genre in the literary market. In fact, some, particularly in the anglophone world, talk about a 'realist turn' in contemporary literature and culture, which can be seen in relation to the failure of anti-normative strategies of cultural experimentation and avant-gardism. As Rachel Greenwald Smith has argued, this realist turn constitutes perhaps the ultimate capitulation to the marketplace; a domestication of experimentalism and hard-edgedness in the guise of hybrid forms (exemplified by autofiction) that she terms 'compromise aesthetics'.⁵⁷ More generously, the declared realist turn might instead be seen not so much as capitulation or reversion – a retreat to the Euro- and anthropo-centric antecedents of realism's liberal humanist heyday – but as a calculated response; a knowing acknowledgement of the failure of aesthetic autonomy to overcome its marketisation and a rallying cry for the construction of new, and alternative, universalisms.

The debate on contemporary literature and its world-making potential is – fortunately – not only limited to realist narratives. While some of the essays in

this issue ‘stay with the trouble’ of realist works and their function in the public sphere, others set out to explore alternative genres or expressive modes that pluralise the possibilities of conceptualising literature’s world-making potential, as well as our understanding of realism itself. As Marshall convincingly shows in her study *Novels by Aliens*, in recent years realist narratives are increasingly hybridised by an ‘invasion’ of modes, figures and forms from ‘genre fiction’, and particularly science fiction, fantasy, horror and weird fiction. While realism still dominates the mainstream literary market, we see that literary works that win prestigious prizes (by George Saunders or Kazuo Ishiguro, for example) regularly integrate weird, fantastic elements in realist settings or adopt forms of genre hybridity.⁵⁸ One of these works which involve ‘fabulism and genre hybridity’ is Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, which takes centre stage in Laura Bieger’s essay in this issue.

This hybridisation of realist narratives points to the limits of (traditional, anthropocentric) realist representation, while offering new paths for reinventing realism through a preoccupation with nonhuman perspectives, multiple scales and estranging forms. As a result, Marshall notes, contemporary critiques of realism and its limitations are accompanied by several ‘postmillennial critical realisms’, among which we find ‘speculative, peripheral, capitalist, lyrical, and weird’ realisms.⁵⁹ This shift to genre hybridity is changing our understanding of realism, and, by extension, broadens and pluralises our understanding of literature’s relations to, and functions in, the world. At the same time, genres of speculative fiction are also entering mainstream literature from the margins, pointing to the need for alternative, experimental, estranging forms and narratives to navigate a disorientating, crisis-ridden present and imagine alternative futures. In this spirit, Maria Boletsi’s essay in this issue draws attention to the twenty-first-century prominence of the previously marginalised genre of weird fiction (both in the literary market and in scholarly studies), and the remarkable ‘spillover’ of its themes, forms and devices in posthuman, ecocritical and new materialist theories, philosophy, public culture and other domains today.

Even though the developments and debates briefly sketched above take us in different (sometimes conflicting) theoretical and ideological directions, they do testify to a renewed preoccupation with the modes and terms through which literature and fiction can become resources for responding to planetary challenges today. In exploring literature’s involvement in forms of public world-making in this issue, we are reclaiming the project of fictionality in the twenty-first century as one that should insist on not only the *entanglement* of, but also the *distinction* between, fiction and reality – or literature and the world. This distinction is a condition, we argue, for critically reflecting on our realities and imagining alternatives, because maintaining it safeguards literature’s mediating function in the social world. This is a multivalent function that can take the form of imitating, reflecting, subverting, twisting, enhancing, sublimating, withdrawing and so forth, thereby equipping readers with

various lenses through which they can assume a reflexive stance towards their realities and channel desires for the *otherwise*.

Anna Kornbluh's recent, perspicacious study on 'immediacy' as the cultural logic of what she calls 'too late capitalism' in the new millennium can help us clarify our plea for a distinction between fiction and reality – strong as their intertwinement is, and *should* be – and put it into sharper relief. Kornbluh diagnoses a generalised 'cultural compulsion' in the twenty-first century to do away with mediation in favour of immediacy of experience and total immersion in the present.⁶⁰ This obsession with immediacy, Kornbluh argues, can be seen as a way to shield oneself from an unbearable crisis-ridden present that appears to be without futurity: 'The more dehumanizing our world becomes, the more gross the failures of human society, the more splintered the efforts at collective transformation – the more tightly immediacy cinches.'⁶¹ As it feels futile to try and transform a world that is already disintegrating and actively destroyed – first and foremost through ecocide – we resort to 'eating the real with a spoon'.⁶² Kornbluh traces this aversion to mediation in art and literature, which also seem to renounce their 'own project of mediation' in favour of total 'immersiveness', 'directness', 'literalism' and 'instantaneity'.⁶³ Contemporary literature, she writes, 'repudiates representation itself, dismantling narration, character, plot, and the smoke of myth in favour of simply manifesting viscerally affecting stuff'.⁶⁴ This 'dismantling of representation' and mediation that she traces in popular types of literature (in, for example, autofiction or literature privileging affective immersion and individual experience) can be seen, in Kornbluh's terms, as a 'destruction of fictionality'.⁶⁵ Indeed, fictionality presupposes mediation: a back and forth between the interconnected planes of fiction and social world that allows readers or audiences to make connections, to make sense of things, and 'to imaginatively break with the merely given'.⁶⁶

Literary authors also take stance in this debate. Zadie Smith's recent apologia for literary experimentalism, 'Fascinated to Presume', for example, critically reflects on the contemporary quest for a supposedly unmediated 'authenticity of personal experience', which, in her view, fully clashes with what novels (and more generally, literature) do: 'Embarrassed by the novel – and its mortifying habit of putting words into the mouths of others – many have moved swiftly on to what they perceive to be safer ground, namely, the supposedly unquestionable authenticity of personal experience.'⁶⁷ These authentic selves run parallel, she suggests, to algorithmic processes that structure the pseudo-public sphere of social media; processes that produce a 'data version of you [that] is "correct" to the nth degree' and makes 'the fuzzy knowledge of selves that fiction once claimed look truly pathetic'.⁶⁸ Standing in an antagonistic relation to fictionality, then, the mode of immediacy 'short-circuits and preempts this social process, swelling with self-identical thisness'.⁶⁹ To put it in the terms of theory of fiction, if mediation ensures that in their 'willing suspension of disbelief' an audience maintains their awareness of the

difference between a fictional and real universe, immersion turns an audience's – or a public's – 'disbelief' into 'belief', enabling this difference to be forgotten.⁷⁰

While mediation is surely no panacea or recipe that guarantees emancipatory change – it can also feed conservative, exclusionary, discriminatory worldviews – the mediation that fictionality involves, we argue, is an indispensable condition for 'imagining different frames of value, meaning, representation, and collectivity'.⁷¹ Indeed, many essays in this issue draw attention to counterhegemonic or countercultural works, trends and projects that mobilise forms of mediation through fiction with critical, emancipatory or transformative potential in the public sphere. And even if that potential is not always actualised, the essays, diverse as they are in content and scope, share a commitment to examining literary practices and cultures of literary production and reception as sites of critical emancipatory intervention and invention that generate, sustain and index critical and counter-public spheres and modalities of interaction.

Mapping the Essays

In many senses, the essays in this issue retrieve this critical potential by revisiting older literary works from the vantage of present-day concerns, examining what they mean for world-making today. In doing so, they harness – in Monique Roelofs's words – 'the critical sensibilities and vocabularies' through which literatures and the publics they constitute challenge the world-breaking forces of our present moment. The seven essays in our issue articulate at least four broad dimensions of publicness: the corporealities of publicness and the stakes of embodiment in the public domain; the constitution of particular readerly publics by the spatio-temporal movement and circulation of literary texts and their authors; the modes of relationality necessary for the construction of critical and emancipatory forms of publicness; and the infrastructures and forms that shape and mould resistant and emancipatory publics across temporal and geopolitical divides.

Maria Boletsi's essay, 'The Politics of Weird Aesthetics: Fictionality in New Forms of Protest', probes how fictionality is (re-)entering public spaces – dominated by securitisation, biopolitical control and authoritarian politics – through forms of protest that mobilise fictional modalities and *weird aesthetics*. The *weird* is a hybrid genre that uses speculative fiction, multiple scales and human/nonhuman entanglements to 'twist' rationalism, realism and normative constructions of common sense. Boletsi's essay traces a spillover of the weird in public space through recent forms of protest and activism from the margins and periphery of Europe which engage in strategies of 'weirding' the dimensions, scale and ontological standing of the *body* in public space. Forging unexpected alliances between human and nonhuman forces (monsters, aliens, ghosts, toys), these interventions, Boletsi demonstrates, involve spectral, miniaturised, undisciplined, oversized, monstrous and fictionalised

bodies, through which they project the entanglement of fiction and reality as a world-making force without collapsing the boundary between them. If post-truth populists, (neo-)fascists or conspiracists often use fictional, excessive scenarios to normalise controversial worldviews, how are the fictional and the weird mobilised for critical, emancipatory projects that reclaim public space as an arena for inclusive, democratic politics? While taking the local contexts of these protest events into account, Boletsi focuses on the ethical, political, epistemological and ontological implications of studying them *together*, as a constellation, under the heading of the *weird*, in order to probe not only the forms of subjectivity and agency they put forward, but also the entanglement and tension between fiction and reality as a condition for critique, democratic politics and public world-making today.

In 'Public Things, Public Squares: Aesthetic Democracy in Diamela Eltit's *E. Luminata*', Monique Roelofs reads a novel published during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile that contemplates society's total governance by a neoliberal world system overrun by technology. If a city's public square is a 'pillar of public participation and democracy', in *E. Luminata* we see a square dominated by an illuminated sign which signifies a seemingly total control of processes of subjectivation. Here in this scene of diminished public life, one resistant subject, the 'bag lady', undermines the sign's power, consolidating, in Roelofs's interpretation, a set of aesthetic conditions and forms of interaction that can potentially resist and challenge the control of subjectivation processes under a totalitarian neoliberal order. The bag lady's interaction with the public in the square becomes, as it were, a counter-index, one that gives aesthetic form – and thus agency – to an increasingly threatened and jeopardised public sphere. Her body mediates between the sign's controlling effort and the public it forcibly constitutes; she 'circumvents the sign's auratic subjectivation procedures'. As such, the bag lady, in Roelofs's analysis, becomes a model to conceptualise a notion of aesthetic publicness which features decolonial aesthetic stances that partake of registers of autonomy and heteronomy alike, and interweave aesthetic distance with aesthetic connectedness: forms of mediation, indeed, which yield critical reconfigurations of collectivity and reanimate literature as a site of critical invention. In Roelofs's reading, the aesthetic resists a total subsumption of subjecthood in a neoliberal order and participates in the workings of Honig's 'public things', functioning as a democratising force.

Marco de Waard's essay, 'Fictions of (Dis)Incorporation: José Saramago and the People's Two Bodies', continues this issue's focus on corporeality in public space – or, on the way in which resistant subjects publicly 'appear' and affirm their bodies as sites of democratic agency. It does so through a reading of some of José Saramago's later novels from a perspective that draws on philosophers Jacques Rancière and Claude Lefort: two thinkers whose thoughts on democracy and corporeality, while starkly different in some respects, converge on the image of the 'people's two bodies'. What happens in democratic 'imaginaries of publicness', de Waard asks, when popular sovereignty is

grasped under the sign of social *disincorporation*, with the people's body understood as constitutively divided? What underlying political ontology is at work, and how may political agency be reimagined in the fictional mediation of embodied collectivity? And, considering how widely cited Saramago's *Blindness* has been in pandemic reading lists since 2020, how has this novel helped envision a shared corporeal orientation as a basis for (counter)publicness – following experiences of self-isolation and lockdown? Pursuing these questions by putting Saramago, Rancière and Lefort in dialogue with each other, the essay ends by tracing 'a post-pandemic imaginary in which the body's public exposure is the site for new thinking about world-making and change in a condition of plurality'.

Taking us beyond questions of public corporeality, Remo Verdickt and Pieter Vermeulen's essay, 'Afterlives of the Literary: James Baldwin's Posthumous Publics', turns to the structures and infrastructures of literary reception to discuss the kinds of publics and counterpublics constituted by texts and their movements. By analysing the posthumous career of James Baldwin across twenty-first-century literature and culture, the essay illustrates how literature today increasingly needs to justify itself in non-literary terms. The mobilisation of Baldwin as both a literary icon and an ethico-political touchstone, Verdickt and Vermeulen argue, can best be understood as a transfer between two kinds of counterpublic: a contestatory counterpublic sphere marked by ethico-political resistance, and a literary sphere that, to all intents and purposes, has become a counterpublic one, aware of its subordinate status. The essay draws on Baldwin's circulation on social media, his contemporary translation trajectories in European markets, and his mobilisation in literary value discourse. The two counterpublics, the essay concludes, are mainly distinguished by the very different extents to which they mobilise Baldwin's queerness: while this aspect of his persona is remarkably muted in the ethico-political counterpublic for his work, it is central to his literary identity.

Marc Farrant's essay, 'Illiberal Publics: Irony, Critique and Trumpism in Ben Lerner's *The Topeka School* and Hari Kunzru's *Red Pill*', turns to a different aspect of contemporary publicness as it considers two contemporary novels which imaginatively engage with the rising tide of illiberalism. As Farrant shows, Ben Lerner's *The Topeka School* and Hari Kunzru's *Red Pill* – both of which register the election of Donald Trump and the rise of the so-called New Right – reflect on a contemporary ambivalence towards aesthetic autonomy and irony in the public sphere, an ambivalence which follows from the right-wing or reactionary co-opting of critical vanguardism. Lerner and Kunzru both depict 'a culture beyond satire, where critique is not only *incorporated* but *precorporated*', to speak with Mark Fisher. Significantly, as both novels explore the new global illiberalism, they suggest a critique of what Kunzru calls 'a certain complacent high liberalism' – one that is not simply oppositional to the illiberal forces that challenge it. As it analyses these issues, the essay zooms in on some highly resonant public-sphere representations: contemporary public-speech pathologies in *The Topeka School*, evoked by

Lerner in the form of a debating strategy called ‘the spread’; and an image of a Habermasian public sphere turned into surveillance apparatus in *Red Pill*, where it is shown as promoting obligatory forms of sociality which Kunzru’s narrator escapes by fleeing into a dubious pseudo-public realm online. Both novels register profound anxieties over the way that contemporary, illiberalising public spheres are inhabited – or inhabitable – by their male protagonists today.

For Laura Bieger, literary publicness is to be approached infrastructurally, with ‘infrastructure’ to be understood in a formal and aesthetic as well as in a material dimension. In ‘The Underground Railroad and the Promise of Infrastructure’, Bieger traces the clandestine infrastructure of the nineteenth-century ‘Underground Railroad’ from its historical emergence in the US through to its literary and cultural re-mediations today. Created in a collective act of civil disobedience that enslaved persons of African descent used in order to escape from bondage in the Plantation South, the Underground Railroad became an important *symbolic* platform in the fight against anti-Black racism following the Civil War. Bieger reassesses the railroad’s aesthetic and imaginary components over time and into the present: How did the infrastructure of the historical railroad – one not of extraction but of liberation – make creative use of elements, processes and terminology bequeathed by an older infrastructure of colonisation and exploitation? And how, considering the aesthetic and imaginative aspects of the Underground Railroad, has its resistance function changed? Through an analysis of Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, Bieger traces the railroad’s transformation from flight network to memorial site as linked to artistic endeavours that work to democratic ends. As Bieger examines ‘the novel’s stakes in being part of a larger infrastructure of commemoration and political mobilisation’ – one in which people and language, too, are infrastructural – she argues that the ‘promise’ of this ‘infrastructuring practice [...] lies in its commitment to sustaining Black life as a “living movement”, however long that movement takes’.

While commemoration and mobilisation seem to be the central stakes of an infrastructuring practice as a practice of creating affective and emancipatory publics, in ‘The Sea as Poièsis, the Poetics of the Sea: Glissant’s *The Indies* and the Poetics of Public World Relation’ Nadkarni turns their attention to what they call, drawing on Édouard Glissant, a global postcolonial commons. Following Glissant in articulating the colonial encounter as the site of both a crisis of publicness and the birth of a globalised public sphere, Nadkarni asks: What do publics so constituted by a defining crisis do? What is their mode of being in common? What and how do they share? Is there an adequate metaphor for this social body-in-common that is also necessarily engaged in the labour of creating and sustaining such a commons? Moving from infrastructure to ante-structure, Nadkarni’s essay works with the Glissantian figure of the sea to consolidate a metaphor for the postcolonial globalised public sphere as a commons that is always labouring to come into form. With Glissant’s *The Indies*, Nadkarni imagines a poetic commons as the

basis of political life, as political ontology, and as poièsis itself. The figure of the sea, Nadkarni argues, names particular modalities of relationality, defined by the labour of understanding the other (and the self *as* other); as such, it offers a model for ‘an aspirational poetic planetarity that is fundamentally plural, anti-racist, anti-identitarian, and calibrated to the struggles of marginalised voices to obtain equality on a global stage’.

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Notes

¹ So far, in the US context, Refaat Alareer has had memorial libraries named after him at UCLA, the University of Pennsylvania, and Portland State University among others. For more detail on the Walid Daqqa Campus at Amsterdam’s Science Park, see ‘Nieuw Gaza: UvA-kampement bij Science Park Amsterdam’, Globalinfo, 17 June 2024.

² Protesters have, for example, made reference to both Daqqa’s and Alareer’s works, including Alareer’s poem ‘If I Must Die’, which has circulated widely online as a (translated) text and as a recording, and has thus gained posthumous fame. Although this is not the place to develop a detailed discussion of the references to Daqqa and Alareer, it seems relevant to note here that the latter, a literary scholar as well as a poet, understood literature’s storytelling powers in terms that are infrastructural in their emphasis on the ‘reproductive capacities’ of stories ‘for personal and social livelihood’. See Norman Saadi Nikro, ‘Refaat Alareer: Storytelling and Memory as Infrastructural Livelihood’, *Overland*, 12 February 2024.

³ We use the term ‘counterpublics’ here in the sense first delineated by Nancy Fraser in a now classic article of 1990. In it, Fraser speaks of ‘subaltern counterpublics’, associating them with ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn

permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs’. See Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), pp. 56–80 (p. 67). Equally influential with regard to the concept of counterpublics has been Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Zone Books, 2002).

⁴ The Ravenstein Winter School 2022 was titled ‘Literature, (Neo)Liberalism, and Public Culture’, and it took place in Amsterdam from 19 to 21 January 2022. The programme can be found at: <<https://www.oslit.nl/ravenstein-winter-school-literature-neoliberalism-and-public-culture/>>.

⁵ See for example Dana Villa, *Public Freedom* (Princeton University Press, 2008), especially pp. 1–26; Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Zone Books, 2015) and *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics in the West* (Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁶ Amia Srinivasan, ‘If We Say Yes’, *London Review of Books*, 46.10 (2024), pp. 3–6 (p. 5). While being careful to distinguish between free speech and academic freedom, Srinivasan gives some telling examples from the UK and the US of the extent to which ‘narrow construal[s]’ of the former are being deployed to silence (campus) protest or dissent. On the weaponising appropriation of free speech rhetoric, specifically where it claims ‘tactical’ or

'reverse victimhood', see also: Lilie Chouliaraki, *Wronged: The Weaponization of Victimhood* (Columbia University Press, 2024), pp. 30, 81.

⁷ A different way of putting this is to say that the university is itself a public sphere in crisis. On the idea of the university as a public sphere in its own right, see Victoria Harper, 'Neoliberalism, Democracy and the University as a Public Sphere: An Interview with Henry A. Giroux', *Policy Futures in Education*, 12.8 (2014), pp. 1078–83.

⁸ Bruce Robbins, 'Public', in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 2nd edn (New York University Press, 2014), pp. 200–03 (p. 201). For Robbins, the 'indefiniteness' here seems a strength insofar as it links publics with qualities of openness.

⁹ Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 57.

¹⁰ We take our term here from Michael Warner, who writes that the 'idea of a public is a cultural form, a kind of practical fiction' that is enabled by conditions unique to 'the modern world': Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 8.

¹¹ The historical model explored by Habermas in his early work was, as is well-known, a broadly nineteenth-century and Western European one: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Polity Press, 1989). The debate about the limits and exclusions of Habermas's (initial) public-sphere model has so often been revisited that we will not rehearse it here. See for example the different contributions to *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. by Craig Calhoun (MIT Press, 1992).

¹² Perhaps the most influential public-sphere model alongside Habermas's, certainly in the last twenty to thirty years, is that of Hannah Arendt, as we will discuss below.

¹³ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*; Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Victorian Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 2010); Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (Fordham University Press, 2017).

¹⁴ Our quote here is from Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', p. 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁶ For a carefully developed example of what we mean by a 'public-sphere narrative',

we refer to Lauren Berlant's incisive analysis of the hegemonic consolidation of a narrative or image of the so-called 'intimate public sphere' in the US during the Reagan and Clinton years; see the introduction to Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 1–24. The term 'public-sphere narratives' is borrowed from Berlant (p. 10).

¹⁷ In recognising that neoliberalism, seen as a mode of rule, has its own internal history, and that literary culture has co-evolved with it since (broadly) the late 1970s, we build on scholarship that has sought to map the historical trajectory of this double – entangled – evolution. See the introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. by Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), which sketches a historical narrative in four phases (pp. 1–18).

¹⁸ Not every approach to modern and contemporary public spheres would place their 'public' and 'political' qualities so close to each other, as if they are proximate terms. It is arguably in line, however, with Hannah Arendt's model of the public realm. On this point, very helpful is Dana Villa's study *Public Freedom*, which speaks – in critical dialogue with Arendt, among others – of 'public-political life' in order to promote commitment to 'public' or political freedoms as opposed to the individual, self-interested freedoms typically foregrounded by neoliberalism. As Villa puts it, neoliberalism's 'exploitative, instrumental, and fundamentally strategic approach to politics and political action' risks 'render[ing] the public sphere an unfit place for human habitation' (p. 6).

¹⁹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, 3rd edn (Canongate, 2016), p. xxiii.

²⁰ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, pp. 56–63.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55; Warner speaks here of a 'public' as a 'special kind of virtual social object'.

²² Cf. Richard J. Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now* (Polity, 2018), especially pp. 83–103.

²³ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 61. Warner's emphasis on mediation inflects the term 'world making' itself in this passage, as it does throughout his book. For him, '[a] public is poetic world making' on account of the 'performative dimension of public

discourse' and 'the poetic functions of both language and corporeal expressivity in giving a particular shape to publics' [original emphasis] (pp. 114–15). Warner's close association of publics with world-making is highly salient to us in this special issue, even if the essays that follow understand the notion of world-making in different ways.

²⁴ D. N. Rodowick, *An Education in Judgment: Hannah Arendt and the Humanities* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. xvii.

²⁵ Marco de Waard, 'Publics, Memory, Affect (or, Rethinking Publicness with Peter Watkins and Hannah Arendt)', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Digital and Public Humanities*, ed. by Anne Schwan and Tara Thomson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 131–47 (see pp. 141–44).

²⁶ Warner, pp. 11–12.

²⁷ Adriana Michele Campos Johnson and Daniel Nemser, 'Introduction: Reading for Infrastructure', *Social Text*, 40.4 (2022), pp. 1–16 (p. 2). For another example of the new turn to infrastructural thinking in the humanities, see Caroline Levine, *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (Princeton University Press, 2023), most especially the chapter on 'Infrastructures for Collective Life' (pp. 54–82).

²⁸ Johnson and Nemser, 'Introduction', p. 7.

²⁹ Honig, *Public Things*, p. 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³¹ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Routledge, 2005); Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (Verso, 2013); Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (Verso, 2018).

³² Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose (University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Jacques Rancière, *La haine de la démocratie* (La fabrique, 2005); Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Polity Press, 2004).

³³ Robin Celikates, 'De-, Hyper-, or Pseudopoliticization? Undoing and Remaking the Demos in the Age of Right-Wing Authoritarianism', in *Power, Neoliberalism, and the Reinvention of Politics: The Critical Theory of Wendy Brown*, ed. by Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta (Penn State University Press, 2022), pp. 141–57. Celikates comments on 'how what looks like hyperpoliticization' is often 'not only

illiberal and antidemocratic but also antipolitical' (p. 146).

³⁴ Anton Jäger, 'Political Instincts?', *Sidecar, New Left Review*, 19 March 2024.

³⁵ Highly pertinent here is Wendy Brown's recent diagnosis of what she calls 'antidemocratic authoritarian liberalism': Wendy Brown, 'What Is Left of Freedom?', in *Power, Neoliberalism, and the Reinvention of Politics*, ed. by Allen and Mendieta, pp. 17–41 (pp. 25–28).

³⁶ One of the limitations of Jäger's thesis about the substitution of post-politics with hyper-politics is that it wholly elides this distinction. Jäger has put forward his thesis in different places, among them a much-discussed piece for *Jacobin*: 'From Post-Politics to Hyper-Politics', *Jacobin*, 14 February 2022. A much-extended version is available as a book published in Dutch: Anton Jäger, *Hyperpolitiek: extreme politisering zonder politieke gevolgen* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, 2024).

³⁷ Wendy Brown has pursued this thesis through two rather different books, *Undoing the Demos* and *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*.

³⁸ Brown, 'What Is Left of Freedom?', p. 22.

³⁹ Cf. some of the contributions to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. by Huehls and Greenwald Smith.

⁴⁰ Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (Verso, 2023), see especially chapter 7.

⁴¹ Bonnie Honig, *Shell-Shocked: Feminist Criticism after Trump* (Fordham University Press, 2021), p. 13.

⁴² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), p. 226.

⁴³ Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 135.

⁴⁴ Stathis Gourgouris, *Does Literature Think? Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era* (Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁴⁵ Kate Marshall, *Novels by Aliens: Weird Tales and the Twenty-First Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2023), p. 19.

⁴⁶ Pavel, *Fictional Worlds*, pp. 11, 26.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context', in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 307–30.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of*

Literature, ed. by Derek Attridge (Routledge, 1992), p. 36.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵² Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016); Byung-Chul Han, *The Crisis of Narration*, trans. by Daniel Steuer (Polity Press, 2024).

⁵³ Rebecca Solnit, “‘If You Win the Popular Imagination, You Change the Game’: Why We Need New Stories on Climate”, *Guardian*, 12 January 2023.

⁵⁴ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), p. 8.

⁵⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Henry Ivry, *Transscalar Critique: Climate, Blackness, Crisis* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), pp. 34, 8–9.

⁵⁷ Rachel Greenwald Smith, *On Compromise: Art, Politics, and the Fate of an American Ideal* (Graywolf Press, 2021), p. 11.

⁵⁸ Marshall, *Novels by Aliens*, p. 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁶⁰ Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2024), p. 8. This reference, and all subsequent references, to Kornbluh are to pages of the EPUB ebook.

⁶¹ Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, p. 14.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Zadie Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction’, *New York Review of Books*, 24 October 2019.

⁶⁸ Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume’.

⁶⁹ Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, p. 10. Post-modernism, for example, exalted mediation with its privileging of ‘intertextuality, irony, the meta’ and the playful pastiche of heterogeneous styles, which, as Fredric Jameson famously argued, voided historicity and served the cultural logic of late capitalism (*ibid.*, p. 12); see also Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991). Instead of ‘evasive delusion’, the current ‘genres of immediacy’, according to Kornbluh, prompt ‘deeper enthrallment in the spectacle of mass abjection, an enveloping total sensory engagement with too-real social distortion’ (p. 10).

⁷⁰ The contemporary cultural obsession with ‘immediacy’ and ‘authenticity’ is of course not only registering in literary production, but can also be seen to pervade many areas of public culture, including politics and social media. For two recent critical studies, see Emily Hund, *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2023); and Michael Serazio, *The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it ‘Real’ in Media, Culture, and Politics* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

⁷¹ Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, p. 15.

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Marco de Waard and **Maria Boletsi** conceived the introductory essay; Marco designed it, and together Marco and Maria devised the analysis and argument presented therein. All authors contributed to the writing of the introductory essay; Marco, Maria, **Marc Farrant** and **Divya Nadkarni** each wrote sections of it, and together Marco, Maria and Divya reviewed and edited it.