

Editor's Column

Infrastructure Art

THREE TIMES A YEAR, FALL, WINTER, AND SPRING, THE *PMLA* EDITORIAL Board meets to discuss articles recommended by first-round reviewers. Some come with glowing reports, others have received more mixed reviews, and almost all have been carefully revised. Now here they are—a hefty stack, though not so hefty if one remembers that these final-round essays are only fifteen percent of the hundreds submitted each year.

This final review is a big deal for the authors, and a big deal for the Editorial Board. Each new member arrives as a novice, but, mediated by the group as a whole, each is acclimatized on the spot, together turning this venerable procedure into a living, breathing ritual. By nature this is a ritual collectively honed, carrying no one's signature but making a difference to all concerned: those making decisions and those awaiting the outcomes, including *PMLA*'s readers.

A ritual of this sort says more about the journal than about any individual editor, since all the essays have been submitted anonymously by MLA members and reflect the diversity of the work being done by the membership. The peer review of these submissions is undertaken on behalf of a collective endeavor—a service every MLA member is entitled to, and a service every member could be called on to perform. Collegiality and generosity are integral to the process, but the input of reviewers is not highlighted: if the article is rejected, the painstaking work often results in an improved essay, but one that appears elsewhere; even if the article is accepted, the recognition accrues only to the author.

I'd like to think of *PMLA*, then, as representing two kinds of work, one complementing the other and together offering two protocols for what counts as scholarship, with two input platforms and two output formats: inscriptional and procedural, solo performance

and group authorship. The solo performance is very much in the foreground; in fact, that's why we read the journal. Most of us think of scholarly work as consisting only of this. Taking the form of writing, and especially the form of the printed word, it makes its way into the world as an individual showpiece, a finished product exclusively identified with a single, sovereign author. The group authorship of the review team is, by contrast, non-sovereign, unfinished, and often not limited to a single medium. Occasioned by writings of others, it is not based solely (or even primarily) on writing but often takes other forms, with rules of engagement that are social rather than textual, collectively improvised rather than singly scripted.

This other kind of work I'd like to call "infrastructure art": the collective expression of a group mediated by its own stated principles and procedures, serious about its outcomes but also with play and camaraderie mixed in, and not to be equated with productivity as it is traditionally defined and rewarded. Text-based only in some instances or select features, infrastructure art is author-opaque and tool-flexible, undertaken for the most part voluntarily and almost always becoming crowdsourced over time. Not quantifiable by one yardstick, and not existing as a finished product, it cannot be owned by a single individual. Distributed agency and improvised venues make weak proprietorship inevitable. The input from anyone is absorbed and diffused, rendered less and less distinct in a bottom-up osmosis, a capillary action drawing on a stream of contributors and media forms, open to updates and remakes in a perpetually incomplete state, not specifiable or knowable ahead of time.

In this Editor's Column (and most likely in future ones), I'd like to compile some field reports about the variety of such long-running, collectively honed, and continually tinkered-with art forms now flourishing in the humanities. A counterpoint to the indi-

vidually signed essays, group-improvised art speaks to a different set of aspirations in our discipline, less centered on the high-wire virtuosity of solo performers and agnostic when it comes to the choice of participatory forms. Such work suggests that there is much to be said for claiming a place for the humanities among the STEM courses—under a more capacious designation, STEAM—and highlighting the experimental nature of what we try, collaboratively and over the long haul, to bring into existence: a form of work that is hands-on, in-progress, and jury-still-out, evolving through trial and error, open to unscripted outcomes, and therefore better able to adapt than the finished article or book with the proverbial last word. No word is "last" in infrastructure art. The *PMLA* review process is only a small example; the larger trend seems to be transforming literary studies as a whole.

Simon Gikandi, the editor of *PMLA* from 2011 to 2016 (fig.1), has given this trend tangible expression both in the collaborative making that he celebrates in his scholarship and in the multiply sourced, process-oriented



FIG. 1

Simon Gikandi
at the 2013 MLA
convention.

visual material that he has brought to the journal. The cover art from the past few years, selected by him, is a case in point. Striking in its breadth, it includes a 1488 illuminated manuscript by Kamal al-Din Bihzad from the National Library of Cairo; a 1780 Jaipur painting featuring Krishna and Radha; and mixed-media genres by contemporary artists working with recycled material, such as the bottle-top installations by the Ghanaian-Nigerian artist El Anatsui and the reinvented traditional forms by the Kenyan artist Naomi Wanjiku Gakunga. The covers become a signature for the journal, a shorthand for what the Modern Language Association stands for and aspires to. To be sure, they are a testimony as well to the editor's wide-ranging knowledge in a field most of us would take to be ancillary to our own, but such testimony is muted and almost guaranteed to lapse into silence as the relation between the artworks and the journal becomes more and more naturalized ("PMLA has great covers") and as the presence of the editor becomes less and less discernible.

Over time, infrastructure will take precedence over the individual almost without exception. Homi Bhabha has written of "processional" objects as "suspended between contingency and agency, between mark-making and erasure" (231). Infrastructure art is processional in just this sense. It is a vanishing act, "normalized into taken-for-granted," as John Durham Peters has suggested (33), and destined to be lost sight of. This scheduled disappearance might be a hard pill for some of us to swallow, but Simon has taken it in stride from the very first. Perhaps this willingness to serve from time to time in a supporting role—and to vanish regularly into the woodwork—has something to do with his biography: Simon grew up in Kenya, in a communal setting, and received his bachelor of arts from the University of Nairobi before attending the University of Edinburgh as a British Council Fellow and eventually moving to the United States. It no doubt has something to do as well with his

lifelong interest in art making, as individually crafted objects and as group-improvised forms, what Clifford Geertz calls "collective speech acts" (114), born of our shared needs for expression, our shared "capacities to see, or hear, or touch . . . in the midst of certain things to look at, listen to, handle, think about, cope with, and react to" (118).

Simon's *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, cowinner of the 2012 James Russell Lowell Prize, grew out of both impulses, giving us a vivid example of infrastructure art as subject and as method. The book opens with a 1700 painting of James Drummond, second titular Duke of Perth, by the Flemish Scottish painter John Baptiste de Medina (fig. 2). Simon saw this painting for the first time in Edinburgh, at the National Galleries of Scotland; it became the inspiration—and irritant—for much of his work. What struck him about the painting was the puzzling "addition of a black boy, a slave with the collar of bondage around his neck," taking up about a quarter of the canvas behind the otherwise conventional iconography of Drummond, resplendent in armor (235). Why this added figure? Instead of seeing this black boy simply as a sign of subjection, mean and dirty, the reverse mirror image of the figure of power and privilege, Simon sees him as part of a far more complex formation, at once deep-rooted and multiply sourced, linking the North Atlantic to the Americas, and then returning to Africa. At play here is more than just one individual, or even two individuals; rather, here are two antithetically charged fields, "non-identical twins," superimposed on each other and tangled in their effects. The figure in the background, no less active than the one in the foreground, counters the painting's legible iconography with an energetic unknown, a "slave-driven aesthetic" (235), a turbulent cultural underground that Frantz Fanon would later call a "zone of occult instability" (168).

The challenge for *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* was to recover these turbulent forms,



FIG. 2
John Baptiste de
Medina, *James
Drummond, 2nd
titular Duke of Perth,*
1673–1720, *Jacobite;*
Scottish National
Portrait Gallery.

to give them communal meaning outside the frame of that painting, and outside the confines of a gallery in an imperial metropolis. Beginning with this North Atlantic artifact, Simon's research would take him to what remains of the slave quarters in the Caribbean, on great plantations such as Drax Hall, in Barbados, and Rose Hall, in Jamaica. It would take him to Louisiana and the Carolinas, to plantations of the antebellum South. And it would eventually take him back to Africa, to Cape Coast, in Ghana. What he found again and again, across the Atlantic world, was improvised art evident in every aspect of daily life: the slaves' housing preferences; the design of the "provision grounds," plots of land they were allowed to cultivate on their own; the rhythms and geometries of dances both

secular and religious, all speaking to the inventiveness of those held in bondage, to the experimental spirit of those with limited means.

Remnants of African culture—jars, quilts, and, above all, drums, made from whatever material was at hand—had survived against all odds: "what had survived destruction could not be recuperated as figures of beauty or as an impeccable showpiece of a lost antiquity; rather, it was just one of the many entangled pieces out of which a new Creole culture could be constructed [as] an assemblage of fragments" (235). Creole art such as this was less a tribute to individual artists than to what the group had collectively endured and what it was forced to come up with, an art of finite resources, making the most of what was admittedly not much, energized by what was missing as well as what remained.

"The Ontology of Play," the pivotal last chapter of *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, opens with an Akan-style drum, now in the British Museum, originally brought to Virginia from Africa, an object that brings to mind what Édouard Glissant calls "forced poetics" ("Free and Forced Poetics" 95) and what Stuart Hall glosses as the "forced transculturation" of those who turned "the limited linguistic implements" available under slavery into grounds for experimentation (31). Given the large number of languages spoken by slaves—even those from neighboring regions did not speak the same language—there was no ready-made common tongue available. Rather, a common tongue would have to be cobbled together, through a creolizing process and expressly adapted to the harsh constraints of those who spoke it: a tongue for the illiterate, and therefore sound-based,

movement-based, and performance-based. Glissant is emphatic that these improvised forms are not simply things of the past, peculiar to slaves, but an epoch-spanning activity extending well into the twenty-first century, now carried out with “audiovisual and cybernetic technologies” (“From *The Whole-World Treatise*”). “Not merely a linguistic result” and not limited only to those few places where Creole is spoken (*Poetics* 89), these multiply sourced assemblages are everywhere, versatile and future-oriented, for “the whole world is becoming creolized” (“Unforeseeable Diversity” 290).

This claim to the future, to the “whole world,” and the related claim to a sphere of action broader than language have led the theorist Jean Bernabé and the novelists Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant to go even further, making group-authored improvisation the infrastructure of contemporary life. Their joint manifesto, *Éloge de la Créolité*, opens with this salvo: “Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles” (75). Creolization, the authors continue, is “wrongly and hastily equated with its mere linguistic aspect” (88), when in fact it is a “multidimensional phenomenon” (79), the “major aesthetic vector” of “millennial cultures . . . of future worlds whose signs are already showing” (87–88). In music, cuisine, and fashion, as well as in digital technology, millennials are becoming “Creoles,” a process fueled by twenty-first-century globalization and bearing witness to its built-in limits. Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant insist that what results is not a brave new world but a provisionally put-together and imperfectly functioning “primitive soup” (90), with many glaring shortfalls and with discrepancies between part and whole, between means and ends, all of which would need to be put up with, “to be lived obstinately in each light, in each shadow of our mind” (89).

This emphasis on creolization as imperfect assemblage has led Françoise Vergès and

Carpanin Marimoutou, Wendy Knepper, and Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih to put bricolage at the heart of the process, directly invoking Claude Lévi-Strauss’s use of that term to highlight a resource-poor world and the less-than-streamlined operations that result from adapted means. In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss describes the *bricoleur* as a hard-luck improviser, working with “a collection of oddments left over from human endeavors” (19), the “remains and debris” (22), the “fossilized evidence of the history of an individual or a society” (22). For such a person, the

universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his games are always to make do with whatever is at hand, which is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project. . . . [These tools] are specialized up to a certain point, sufficiently for the “bricoleur” not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use. They each represent a set of actual and possible relations. (17–18)

Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur* is an improviser both constrained and enlarged by nonabundance, for, while his world is one of finite resources, each of these resources, by necessity, would have to be adapted to an unspecified “set of actual and possible relations,” so that the built environment is in fact much more capacious than what might seem from a list of available tools. In the language of Martin Heidegger, we could also say that such an improviser, limited by the scarcity of what is at hand and “subordinate to the in-order-to constitutive” of the “what-for” of things, is in turn amplified by the “conditions of craft” into a “being-in-the-world” (pt. 1, sec. 15). Such a figure Graham Harman would later gloss as a “tool-being,” constituted by the ontology of objects rather than the anthropocentrism of human use.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt calls this tool-being *homo faber*. But instead of making this figure emblematic of all being, she recasts him as one option in a threefold embodiment of work, alongside the *animal laborans* and the *zoon politikon*. Unlike the *animal laborans*, subject to material necessities and shunted into a regimen of work, becoming strictly a means in the process, and unlike the *zoon politikon*, whose means and ends are fatefully bound up with the means and ends of others, *homo faber* stands alone, sovereign unto himself in “his instrumentalization of the world, his confidence in tools and in the productivity of the maker of artificial objects, his trust in the all-comprehensive range of the means-end category” (305). *Homo faber* thinks that he has all the means he needs to achieve his ends. This “anthropocentric utilitarianism,” according to Arendt, “has found its greatest expression in the Kantian formula that no man must ever become a means to an end, that every human being is an end in himself” (155). Much as she admires this injunction, Arendt is unconvinced that it could be sustained in the modern world. *The Human Condition* is a dirge in this sense, singing “the defeat of *homo faber*” against the “victory of the *animal laborans*” in a world in which, with growing frequency, “life overrules all other considerations” (313).

Lévi-Strauss's *bricoleur* turns that dirge on its head. Born and bred in a resource-poor world, this particular *homo faber* has always been a lowly *animal laborans*, taking scarcity for granted and making peace with it. While Lévi-Strauss does not emphasize this point, other advocates of bricolage—creolized advocates—have intuited it from the first. Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant argue, for instance, that creolization points to a world increasingly lacking in the necessities of life, in which the mastery of the human species is undermined by the growing specter of finite means. What such a species can achieve is not the world in its actualized form but rather a “mangrove

swamp of virtualities,” an inhospitable, “non-anthropomorphic” landscape that attests not to the primacy of this species but to its marginality in an epoch of large-scale upheavals (90).

This retreat from anthropocentrism has consequences for all human endeavors, including the attempt to improvise a “we.” The collaborative plurality of that pronoun does not exempt it from scarcity and the unequal access to resources that compound the problem, as Vergès and Marimoutou make a point of stating:

As we wrote we were confronted by the multiple meanings of “we”: the “we” that refers to the authors, the “we” that stands in opposition or confrontation to a “they” (be it on or beyond the island) and the “we” that brings together the island’s inhabitants. We are conscious of the exclusion effects brought about by the “we,” but we know that no group is brought into being without some strategy of exclusion. (4)

A putative entity at all times, more wishful than actual in some cases, the collaborative “we” is the longest-running experiment known to human beings, so far with mixed results, and never more mixed than when the undertaking is the art of bricolage. The relation between means and ends is especially unstable here, Lévi-Strauss warns, for once “it materializes the project will . . . inevitably be at a remove from the initial aim,” so that there is always the danger that “earlier ends” would be “called on to play the part of means” (21).

Simon Gikandi has always recognized this danger. His essay on Picasso and Africa begins with Aubrey Williams,¹ a leading member of Afro-modernism and black abstraction, whose intense dislike of Picasso stems from just that sense of being asked to play the part of means. Williams reports that when the two were introduced, Picasso, completely ignoring the Guyanese artist’s ambitions and achievements, said only that “I had a very fine African head and he would like me to pose for him” (qtd. in “Picasso” 455). Any collaborative “we” is combustible substance here, a minefield that will

never cease being one. Knowing that minefield intimately, knowing its long history as well as its ever-present dangers, Simon has nonetheless not shied away from it, as his partnerships with Chinua Achebe, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Toni Morrison amply attest. Celebrating collaborative making in his scholarship, and enacting it again and again as a living practice, a difficult but vital frame for his literary friendships, Simon turns infrastructure into an art in every sense of that word: demanding, sustaining, and ongoing in its input-rich iterations, in its continually improvised, remixed, and repurposed trajectories in the world.

That art is increasingly a must in the twenty-first century, perhaps the most precarious on record, likely to be shaped by extreme weather, rising sea levels, and a growing scarcity of land, water, food, and medicine. However fragile and chimerical, a collaborative "we" is key to such a resource-poor world, as crucial in the choices that we make about the physical environment as in the forms of scholarship we choose to undertake. *PMLA* will continue to host this "we," charting its manifold appearances in tried-and-tested venues and tracing its experimental pathways in hitherto unexplored terrain. Collaborations between established fields and emerging fields, between humanists and scientists, between old media and new are especially welcome in these pages. In a world where precarity is fast becoming the norm for all too many, these improvised plurals might well be our lifelines to the future. *PMLA* has always been the testing ground for new unknowns. We hope once again to rise to the occasion.

Wai Chee Dimock

NOTE

1. Readers can view photographs of Williams's stunning 2010 show at the Walker Art Gallery here: www.walkerart.com/exhibitions/williams

[.flickr.com/photos/nationalmuseumliverpool/sets/72157623215141134/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nationalmuseumliverpool/sets/72157623215141134/).

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