

Introduction

Critical Theory and Critical Therapy for Here and Now

We need to tell a (different) story.

The advent of modernity, a dead philosopher writes, is marked by the idea that the world can be conceived as a picture, rendering it available for mapping, knowing, and ultimately appropriating.¹ The objectification of the world as picture, a living legal scholar observes, reduces it to a giant stage for human activity, with (the hu)man as its privileged subject and the world as its conquered object.² Modernity imposes a struggle upon the denizens of the globe to distinguish themselves from the other creatures of the world and to strive to count as human. Here, the *I* emerges as the reference point for all experience and interpretation, for freedom and truth. This renaissance and the revolution of (the hu)man are conventionally narrated by liberal society as the turn from religious to secular society, the replacement of feudal culture by capitalist relations, and the rise of the modern European nation-state in the wake of the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. In view of its racializing imaginary and heteropatriarchal impositions, this story must be retold at the very least, we insist, from the perspective of 1492—from the encounter between the Old World and the New World, as well as the clash between waxing and waning empires across the globe. The heterogenous plural *we*, according to this story, is destined to be enveloped by a singular *I* capable of picturing the world.

We could also tell another story: the one about the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*—these tools that humans created, which in turn re-created their makers. This version of the story traces its history through the hulls of the Middle Passage, along the miles of train track that shrunk the time-space continuum, down the barrel of a Remington, into the slums built to house and condition the working classes who migrated from country to city to be swallowed whole by factories, and through the holes of an IBM punch card used to track those factory workers, tally the murdered at Auschwitz, and perform calculations for the thermonuclear bomb.

One of these factories must have made that ur-hammer that so fascinated the dead philosopher we spoke of earlier. If all you have is a hammer *ready at hand*, everything looks like a nail.³ Alternatively, if all you *are* is a network of supercomputers hosting artificial intelligence routines using machine learning algorithms to mine hundreds of millions of NSA phone metadata records and cross-reference them against the seven quadrillion images we have posted on the Internet, everyone looks like a terrorist. Setting aside the question of technodeterminism and predictive analysis, the fact is, the tools change who we are. We have gone past an object-oriented ontology to something akin to an object-embedded subjectivity. *I am already a cyborg—have been for a decade or two now—but I was never a goddess. Not with this trans body.*

We all are cyborgs who have adapted to depend on Google for our memories. When Google tweaks its algorithms, it is tweaking my memory. I have become dependent on the six ounces of glass, circuit boards, and rare earth minerals I keep close to my body. If I lose it or it fails to boot, I panic; I know I am not fully myself without it—cut off from my history, my contacts, and my context. All the while, my mere daily routines of self have become an opportunity to convert discourse into a supple and invisible instrument of value extraction. This story continues to trace its history through the open-pit coltan mines, the city-sized factory compounds of the Pearl River Delta, and the two Internet backbone lines that intersect directly below Google’s New York City headquarters.

Choosing what stories to tell about the various political, economic, and cultural arrangements of here and now—spatial and temporal relations that have been placed under extraordinary duress by everything from ambient computation to climate disaster—is to reckon with the distributive consequences of the uneven flows of capital, goods, people, and well-being across the global game-space. It is also to acknowledge that the flows we may identify are premised on and made comprehensible by particular framings of the world. For most of us the game-space of capital does not feel anything like a game, however, and our stories have an entirely different affective sensibility than traditional game theory.⁴

This text, “**Here and Now**,”⁵ collectively brainstormed and written by the After Globalism Writing Group over the course of six days, offers eclectic analyses and meditations on the various disasters and emergencies that have occurred in the wake of 1492. The evolving cultures and practices of extraction now extend themselves into data-driven social platforms and networked financial systems operating under the shadows of planetary collapse and the devolution of state power. They flow around and within colonial desires for a universal subject and colonial ambitions for a universal space in which the world continues to be transformed into

the arrogated representation and possession of (the hu)man, once and still (hu)man. Equally so, they inflect long histories of capital affirming a narrative of liberal progress, development, and the end of history in the North, subtended by unending stories of disaster, devaluation, and disposability in the South. Choosing what stories to tell about these disasters and emergencies might be considered another name for critical thinking—and critical therapy—for a precarious here and now, a disappearing present and presence, under erasure.

A Disturbance Manual

On 11 November 2016, three days after the US presidential election, members of the *Social Text* editorial collective gathered for our regular “salon meeting.” Held in apartments of members rather than in university spaces, these salons function as an institutional respite for us to discuss ideas outside the regular business of producing the journal and negotiating the vicissitudes of academic life. We had planned to take stock of the intellectual direction of the journal, but clearly everyone there needed to talk about the election and our sorry moods in the aftermath of this event. Capitalism has taught us that affect and feelings are not eccentric to the system but function as a supplement to capital. We wanted to change our feelings.

And we also needed to drink.

Over the course of our conversations in the following weeks, a recurrent question emerged around the state of cultural politics in the way of resurgent global right-wing populist rejectionism: of cultural elites, of truth and representation, of “multiculturalism” and racial liberalism, and perhaps above all of globalism (figured by the Right as a liberal rather than a capitalist enterprise). “Waging culture” in the new culture wars, we surmised, would require thinking through the shifting stakes of left engagement—whether academic, journalistic, or partisan—amid a new environment within which art and culture are, on the one hand, incorporated and administered and, on the other, scapegoated and targeted for downsizing. We needed to work collectively to set up a framework in which we could identify, prioritize, and stake out the issues this conjuncture had thrown up. Michael Mandiberg, a member of the editorial collective, suggested the idea of a *Social Text* “book sprint” as one potential response to the ongoing emergencies of our times, and Michael offered to facilitate the process. “After Globalism?” became the prompt and query to guide this effort.

At 10:15 a.m. on Saturday, 6 May 2017, a group of fourteen composed of both editorial collective members and fellow travelers gathered

in a sunlit classroom at Pratt Institute’s Manhattan campus in downtown New York City. Powered by two large to-go boxes of coffee, a platter of carbohydrates, and the two-word query “After Globalism?” (a title that subsequently morphed into “Here and Now”), we embarked on collective writing sessions to produce this text. We began our process by briefly presenting our own thoughts and writing as they related to the sustained ambitions of globalism. Following the book sprint method, as each person spoke, the rest of us scribbled on yellow Post-it notes. Each Post-it note recorded a discrete object, idea, or question. With few exceptions, we channeled our questions into these notes rather than asking them out loud.

After three hours of presentations, we pasted our probably six or seven hundred Post-it notes on every available surface of the room. We talked a lot as we walked around reading one another’s handwriting. And then we began rearranging these yellow squares of paper, sorting them into thematic constellations. As we grouped them together, we gave each set a title on a pink Post-it note. Somewhere along the way, we realized that committing to a nascent thesis was perhaps more helpful than merely declaring a theme. So we scratched out “Affect,” for example, and replaced it with “Mood as a Political Hermeneutic.” With no “right way” of sorting out or gathering these notes, we followed our collective critical interests, as well as separate lines of expertise and flight. Above all, a book sprint is process oriented.

Over the course of four more days (spread out over two weekends), we wrote this text in shared Google documents. Each text was necessarily started by an individual, but most of them were also written, edited, extended, or rewritten by others in the group, whose composition shifted from day to day. For many of us, the irony that this process was taking place on a technological platform that this very text calls out as central to the extractive economy of the digital was not lost on us. Furthermore, the drive to produce collectively an entire *Social Text* issue through this accelerated method of writing also seemed ironic from the perspective of capitalism’s given time and the framework of labor and wages indexed to the hours and minutes of the workday. We knew we were running the risk of trying to out-Herod Herod.

From time to time, we slowed our measured pace to ruminate, taking breaks to rework the entire outline of the project together, shifting and moving sections through group discussions and consensus. Over this time, we began to see that our collective endeavor was not to answer the query that had brought us together—the analytical questions of whether we were moving to a moment after the globalisms of the past and, if so, what would come after it, or the question of what is to be done in light of

a defining political moment. On the contrary, it was to probe precisely the very limits implicit in the premise of a singular, positive, and universal present as the scene of our global, human life, as the grounds of our political claims. Hence: **here** and **now**.

Among other things, a book sprint is also a collective rather than individualized effort to think critically. In the same breath that it proposes critical thinking *in* common and *as* commons, it also seeks to undercut the possessive *I* as the valorized site for the production of private property—as the locus of value for the commodification of thought as intellectual property. In part, our hope was that collective authorship would help us let go of our (damn) identities, while liberating us from the sometimes ossifying protocols of academic thinking, writing, and production. Moreover, we believe that there is now a growing interest in collectively written texts on the Left, and we see this text as part of that emergent landscape. Our hope is that changing the way we write—by experimenting with different forms and times of writing—might be to change the way we think. And feel. And act.

In reality, the *we* of this text is also an overlapping, divergent, and sometimes disagreeable collective of disparate bodily *Is*, *yous*, and *theys*—an *obfuscaro*, if you will, more than a manifesto. We get along, more than less, but there are varying indices of bodies, positions, identities, and intimacies. In this regard, the instability of the pronoun that erupts across this text is an important reminder that infelicitous grammatical interruptions index a queer method attuned to the historical will to manage bodies, identities, and differences for capital—for the extraction of value in increasingly abstract and immaterial ways.

We talked about collaboration: Could we write on one another's documents? (Yes.) Did we have to ask permission? (No.) Could we preserve the competing voices and dissenting exclamations, or would a multivocal text just reinscribe the obscurity of academic prose? (Who knows?) Yes, a renewed critique of class exploitation under the contemporary shadows of neoliberalism and multiculturalism must account for ongoing and evolving structures and assemblages of gender, sexuality, race, religion, affects, intensities, and networks that are increasingly co-opted in this moment for the goals and purposes of securitizing the flows of global capital. Yes, academia can often feel moribund. And yes, we have to steal back time, thinking, and invention. We agreed on many things. Writing and thinking—art and political critique—cannot be private property if they are to become, let's just say it, real. They are, as we all are, part and parcel of the worlds we inhabit and are trying to remake.

Notes

1. See Heidegger, “Age of the World Picture.”
2. Ruskola, “China in the Age of the World Picture,” 142.
3. Maslow, *Psychology of Science*, 15.
4. See Neumann et al., *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*.

5. We’ve wound up with a funny hybrid: “Here and Now (under Erasure)” as the searchable, web-friendly title, since, as our publishers pointed out, we’re operating within the imperatives of digital academic publishing; “Here and Now” in the text, since the erasure itself is what we want to convey.

References

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