

# How This Text Was Written

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On 11 November 2016, three days after the presidential election, members of the *Social Text* editorial collective gathered at Neferti Tadiar and Jonathan Beller's apartment for a regularly scheduled salon. These salons function as a space for us to discuss ideas outside of the regular business of producing the journal. We had planned to have a conversation about three recent special issues of the journal, but clearly everyone wanted to talk about the election.

During this conversation, questions swirled. *What would happen? Did we need to add new security measures to our phones? To the journal's communications? What should we make of the mainstream media's narrative about working-class whites from the Rust Belt? Should we repurpose the journal in some way?* We also talked about instances in which editorial collective members had been targeted by right-wing media for their politics. There was a strong sense of fear. And also a pervading sense of responsibility. People in the room had dedicated their lives to research and teaching around social justice issues. And, like most others on the left in the United States, we fully expected to be fighting the same fight against neoliberalism and glossed-over drone strikes with the new administration—not a new social and political formation that seemed to indicate a failure of even the neoliberal consensus. *Where did we go wrong?*

Several weeks later we gathered in a smaller, somewhat overheated NYU conference room for a regular business meeting but tabled the special issue proposals and everything else on the agenda to discuss the future of the journal. We generated many ideas, including restarting the numeration of the journal in order to announce, however arbitrarily, the arrival of a new political conjuncture. Part of our analysis was the manner in which the Clinton campaign deployed “intersectionality” as a way of discrediting the social democratic insurgency of Bernie Sanders. This discussion served as one indication of how discourse originating in the left academy was now circulating in politically instrumentalized ways. It was out of this conversation that Michael Mandiberg, a member of the editorial col-

lective, suggested a book sprint and offered to facilitate; there was widespread consensus that this would be a way of doing the public, collective, and collaborative thinking that would be the necessary precondition to any future decision about what is to be done.

The notes from that December meeting read strangely now; the past looks strange from the future. From our vantage point six months after that meeting, what is most striking is what it tells us about ourselves now: we can clearly see that we have all affectively adjusted to the Trump administration in some way. Many of us initially experienced shock. For those of us who carry other histories of having lived under dictatorship and authoritarian rule (including under regimes propped up by the US government as ostensible steward of liberal democracy), the actions of the Trump administration felt familiar even as the election results themselves felt shocking. Either way, we are already in the new normal, which is as terrible as that initial moment of horror but somehow leaves us much less sure that the Brexit/Trump moment is the right event we need to write about now.

Some members wanted to repurpose *Social Text* as a handbook or guide for activists. Others pointed out that other people were already doing that work and that a quarterly journal isn't particularly well suited to it, given the pay wall for access, as well as the long delay from manuscript to publication. Yet others pointed out that people who have been repressed for a long time, and in extreme ways, have had more experience dealing with this kind of shock and were not quite as susceptible to what we were calling "chicken-with-its-head-cut-off syndrome"—that mode of thinking through this unexpected and horrific historical circumstance that produced an avalanche of unconsidered, overconfident, anxious hot takes on *Slate*, the *Atlantic*, and so on.

How to get our heads clear? We talked about the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline. We talked more about attacks from the right wing that editorial collective members had faced and how to support one another in the future. We were still figuring out what had happened. Someone suggested that working-class whites were responsible for Trump's election, and someone else said that the data was bad (which it was). Someone pointed out that almost all the data was bad. We talked about our students. We talked about what resources we had and how to use them. And we talked about how, why, and when to do a book sprint.

A book sprint is a retreat-style collective writing session where participants produce a text in three to five days. This process borrows facilitation techniques from agile software development and unconference methodology to enable experts to write book-length texts with no advance planning, using a loose framing and then collectively determining the detailed contents of the text during the sprint.<sup>1</sup> The technique was devel-

oped by Adam Hyde from Thomas Krag's concept, as part of the FLOSS-manuals.net mission to create manuals for open-source software, and was later attempted with speculative nontechnical subjects.<sup>2</sup> The sprint was facilitated by Michael, who has participated in several of these ventures, including *Collaborative Futures* (2010), the first theoretical book produced during a books print.<sup>3</sup> A sprint starts with an ideation phase that leads to the creation of a table of contents. The group members divide up into sections to write, perhaps working on their own or perhaps working with another participant. The process is reiterative, and the structure and goals of the project may change as the project develops.

In preparing for the sprint we circulated the following as part of our invitation to the editorial collective:

We look to a range of models of collective engagement in imagining the occasion and intent of this book sprint, including our own collectively written Issue 100 (2009) and the Kilburn Manifesto (2015) co-authored by Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey, and Michael Rustin. Where Issue 100 engaged an occasion (an anniversary) internal to the collective life, and the Kilburn Manifesto came out of a geopolitical event (the global financial crisis of 2008), we envision this book sprint as drawing equally upon internal and external prompts. In recent salons and conversations, a recurrent question has been 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 will require thinking through the shifting stakes of left engagement—whether academic, journalistic, or partisan—amidst 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. Working collectively to set up a framework in which we identify, prioritize, and stake out the issues this conjuncture has thrown up for us to address is one key objective for the book sprint.

## Day 1

At 10:15 on Saturday, 6 May, fourteen of us gathered in the sunlit library classroom at Pratt's Manhattan campus. That first weekend the group comprised John Andrews, Jonathan Beller, Marie Buck, Macarena Gómez-Barris, Michael Mandiberg, Anna McCarthy, Tavia Nyong'o, Jennifer Flores Sternad Ponce De León, Alex Pittman, David Sartorius, Neferti Tadiar, Manu Karuka, Michael Wang, and Hentyle Yapp. David Eng would join us for the second weekend. Following our research cluster model, we were a mix of members of the editorial collective and guests invited in based on their expertise. We began with copious supplies of caffeine and carbohydrates, and the two-word title “After Globalism?” As is conventional for the

start of a book sprint, everyone took a turn presenting for ten to fifteen minutes on how their own work related to the topic. Additionally, we presented a summary of our fall meetings to channel the voice/memory of the editorial collective. Throughout these three hours of ideation and idea sharing, we all took notes on yellow Post-its. One Post-it per thought, object, concept, question. We didn't write about our own work; instead, all of our individual ideas were filtered through each other. Instead of asking questions of the presenters, we wrote them down onto our Post-it notes.

After everyone had a chance to speak, Post-it notes covered the whole room. There were six or seven hundred. (We actually had to make an emergency Post-it run, to get more!) Here are some disparate examples:

- MOVEMENTS look very different from eye level
- The middle brow + coverage of Trump admin
- Decolonizing the anthropocene
- Reparation politics that is not depressive
- FACTS?

After our presentations and a short break, we began sorting and grouping all the Post-it notes into the beginnings of a semblance of order. We asked Michael to instruct us on the “right way” to sort them; Michael said there was no one right way and that we should follow our own interests. It was an emergent affair. We talked a lot as we walked around the room reading each other's handwriting and collecting yellow slips of paper.





We grouped affiliated Post-its and titled each group with a pink Post-it. We decided the beginnings of a thesis were better titles than a factually descriptive word. Or to put it another way: there is no point in hiding the fact that metadata contains opinions, arguments, and negotiations. The group initially labeled as “Affect” became “Mood as a Political Hermeneutic,” and so forth. We closed the day by organizing our pink Post-its into a rough table of contents, and each of us chose one section to ruminate on overnight and start writing in the morning.

## Day 2

Down one person (since Manu left to finish his book manuscript, which was due in ten days), we arrived Saturday morning filled with questions: *Who is our audience? Why is the title “After Globalism?” And how did that come about? How should the title frame our writing? What form are we writing in? How collaborative is this writing? How will we ascribe authorship to the text? How much should I write about my own work? If I have to leave after today, what will happen to what I have written, and how am I supposed to continue helping?* Michael wrote down all of our questions on green Post-its, so we could talk about them later. We wanted to talk about them then, but Michael insisted we just write. We wouldn’t know what the thing was until we had written some of it. Someone asked how long we would write for: “Until the food comes.” Within twenty minutes the room was silent,

save for the clicking of keyboards. Without prompting, we spoke to each other in a hushed whisper, as if we had just remembered that we were in a library after all. Even when the food came, we kept writing for another thirty minutes.

After lunch, and a little bit more writing, we talked about our questions. We decided together that the text would be collectively authored. Partly it was our hope that this collectivity would help us let go of our identities and liberate ourselves from the protocols and ossifications of academic writing and thinking. We also noted that there is a tradition of collective authorship in left writing; we see this text in that context. We also talked about collaboration: *Could we write into each others' documents? Did we have to ask permission? Could we preserve the competing voices, or would a multivocal text just reinscribe the obscurity of academic prose? Could our "I" be fluid?*

As someone who wasn't part of the original formation, I asked again about the title, pointing out that what we had ideated the first day was much less about "After Globalism?" and much more about addressing the question of the "here and now" politically. It was about weighing in on the current situation. Someone else suggested that "The Here and Now" might be a suitable title. Another added that because we are writing in a moment of crisis, where the present is under erasure, "The Here and Now under Erasure" might be more apt. Or maybe "~~The Here and Now~~" or just "~~Here and Now~~."<sup>4</sup> We ended the day by checking in with one another about what each of us had written, stopping early to avoid an oncoming spring thunderstorm.

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I had just hastily written something about the absolute sanctity of the inner sanctum, the impossibility of writing under the surveillance of the other, and boldly claimed that writing alone was an act more sacred than relieving one's bowels when, shifting gears, I switched onto the Google Doc to work on fucking philosophy (a section that we eventually took out of this text to post directly to our website). Did I dare say fuck philosophy? I had dared to eat a peach once, so I plunged on in when suddenly who turned up in this Google boudoir but Anna McCarthy. There she was, putting more words on the document that I had taken up. Her cursor moved, her words appeared on the screen as I wrote; it felt like a voice in my head that I didn't know I had and couldn't simulate. And she was funny, very funny. After all, fucking philosophy had been her idea. Soon we were giggling aloud and playing with philosophy like it was a rubber duck. For the most part, philosophy actually is a rubber duck, but few people have as much fun with it as we did. I guess that laughter immediately after my solemn decree also meant *fuck the sanctity of my mind*. Puer-



ile, you may say, all this frolicking in the somber land of serious thought, but I say out of the mouths of babes . . .

### Day 3

A slightly smaller group of nine of us arrived Monday and began work by starting on a new section. Mostly we just wrote. By the end of the day, we had nearly thirty thousand words.

We returned to our everyday lives for a little while. For me it was a relief to be back on my own schedule and to metabolize what had just happened, to move from creating to evaluating mode. I returned to grading, to attending faculty meetings about the future of teaching in the twenty-first century, and to my own writing, in hopes that somehow the book sprint would be energizing rather than enervating for my summer aspirations of academic productivity.

One editorial collective member wrote Thursday night saying she couldn't make it because she had taken on a leadership role in her university's faculty senate to fight egregious cuts to faculty and staff health insurance benefits and punitive administrative overreach against concerned student protesters. Critical votes in the senate and demonstrations were taking place that week. Put another way, this text was collectively composed under conditions that necessarily precluded full participation. Each person had to take the temperature of their own ensemble of projects, priorities, and crises personal and institutional and make a decision

to be present or to be “there in spirit.” To write in this manner, under the duress of the here and now, is thus to be entangled in the then and there, as José Esteban Muñoz taught us to think.<sup>5</sup> One member could not be present because she was preparing for a mission to Palestine. I myself have taken time away from a campus where, as of this writing, graduate student workers are on hunger strike to protest our university president’s open defiance of the results of a successful union drive. We are all stealing time.

#### Day 4

On Friday, our fourth day, before we even had a quorum, our conversation had already turned to questions of purpose and title. *What is it that we are really doing? Is this more about “Collective Futures”?* When we had started this project four months prior, we felt the urgency of the Trump transition. But now things felt like they were business as usual. Was that because Trump was more clearly a continuation of “Amerikkkanness,” or was it something about the character of memory that made it impossible to really recall the quality of time-feeling only a hundred days prior? The group seemed to have lost the sense of the radical break—I know I had—and the meditation/conversation/frenetic inscription process had begun to focus on the here and now, or really here and now as being under siege, hence “**Here and Now.**”

This endeavor has been an effort to surface our process in relation to the cultural-political. At times it seems that the very best work of the editorial collective is in the nuance of conversation around the table. Like in a live performance, there is transformation and then dissipation. No doubt some of the energy of the commons carries forward and blossoms into new forms, but do the new conditions of intellectual labor in a post-Fordist, fractal-fascist world demand a new way of working, where the harmonics of thought, its metadata, require another type of registry and analytic? We were catalyzed by the conflict between the drudgery and ossification of so much of the academic standard operating procedure, its imperial modes of organizing thought and demanding deliverables, and the urgency of a crisis that presented itself as 45 followed Obama’s 44. This conflict drove and drives us to transmit what is still live, still living and also shared, to reckon with an immediacy under siege, and an immediacy that has both history, many histories, and also a future, many futures. Some of these futures are more conducive to life than others.

As David Eng joined us for the second weekend, he echoed comments Ed Cohen had sent over e-mail and asked if we were we still thinking of titling it “After Globalism?” because he did not see it in the text. And if not, what would be the operating rubric? Were we writing a short book or a special issue of the journal? Were the four sections he saw in the

outline separate essays or many fragments? Jon said that was the “either/or fallacy,” to which everyone laughed . . . *with a touch of anxiety*. David also noted that there was very little on sexuality. He also wanted to know how he could best enter into this half-written text, how he could contribute. His questions underlined the larger question of how to move forward.

Michael framed this as the moment to assess, and possibly change, the structure. We were halfway through the writing process, and we could still change how we structured it—whether these were four larger essays, one whole thing, or a series of smaller essays. We needed to be clear that day, since it was the last good opportunity to make changes at that level.

We agreed to let the outline hold for the morning, while one of us worked on a summative introduction. We put up the 150 orphaned Post-it notes that never made it into one of the clusters; our hope was that we might recover some of them, but that never really happened. Returning to unfinished texts and starting new sections, we focused on voice and form, restructuring the table of contents, and stitching through lines and continuity.

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**Macarena Gómez-Barris:** We need to be more intentional in the opening frame of the book, using something like art or a performance to allow an entry point into our themes. Maybe we need a coda on “After Globalism?” Globalism doesn’t signify a presentist project but could refer to a longer project of colonization that began in 1492. So there is also this question of temporality and where we imagine globalism to be located by noting “after.” We’ve already begun to revise how to think about the effects of capitalism by retitling the book “Here and Now” and also by writing pieces that are future oriented. It is not only here and now but also the *what-is-to-be*. We are also revising coloniality in the present, while looking toward future alternatives.

**Anna McCarthy:** We need to think about the structure we are using. We talked about how we wanted to use images and talk about art, but we haven’t really. I want to write about images. But if we are thinking about content, we should think about structure and form more broadly. What about a questionnaire or roundtable or script that could be made up entirely? We should try to break up the prose forms that we use. Maybe we can start with an image, or start each section with an image. We could even include a photo essay, depending on the copyrights on the images.

**Neferti Tadiar:** The question of form is important, but the question of what it is that we want the whole document *to do* is the core, what kind of gesture is it that we are making. We need to think about the whole thing, not just the details. Our goal is more than just pronouncing on the politi-

cal juncture; it is recasting the whole field of orientation with our prose forms, our orientation, and our knowledge. We are putting it in a long frame.

**Jonathan Beller:** For me, it is important to remember that the goal was to access our own process. Our meetings are the most exciting thing I do all semester. The exchange is a form of discourse that falls outside of the categories of academic writing. The forms of academic writing aren't as exciting or mobilizing as the kind of way that they are mobilized in social space. Part of our goal was to achieve that here. Did we?

**Tavia Nyong'o:** The entirety is unbaked, in part because we are in the middle of baking it. But my hope was to get down onto the page the vitality of the conversation of the editorial collective at its best. Of course, the process of putting something down on the page reveals an aspect of how idiosyncratic and specific our inner workings are, how difficult they are to explain. We made a key decision early on not to make this an issue in critical university studies. Yet we are inevitably trying to write out from underneath the very forms that we continue to rely on!

**Anna McCarthy:** That is why I was suggesting a transcript. Not a literal one, because that would be tedious. But something that would . . .

**Tavia Nyong'o:** Where would that go? Should we do that?

**Michael Mandiberg:** Actually, I have been transcribing all of this. [Smiles]

**Marie Buck:** I'm also transcribing. [Smiles]

[Silence for a beat]

**Anna McCarthy:** If we are thinking of form, we should also be thinking about listicles, how-tos . . . something like "Five Questions for People in Power." We should be using the "I" voice but also the "we" voice. And also the second person. What would "Queerness and Extraction" look like as a listicle! That will allow us to break it up.

**Macarena Gómez-Barris:** I hate to be the one to say this, but I think we need to keep a few through lines.

**Hentyle Yapp:** This is about what is going on. The world is falling apart. What do I wish was out there in the world? I want to make that. I want to make the therapy for the now that I'm not getting in other places.

**Neferti Tadiar:** In terms of the continuity question, we have "here and now" and "long arcs of space and time," which provide two structures for that. I agree that we need some continuity but also that this document should be performing a collective dividuality by telling the story of the

here and now through our different voices. This is not a linear story but a world where you could experience what you thought was the here and now but with a different context and history. This world should be full of different dividualities that don't typically occupy the same space—almost like a science fiction account of where we are and what this world is.

**David Eng:** The question of the pronoun has become central to queer studies, so maybe that is a place where we can work. I am also concerned about the bigger-picture framing of the book sprint. I was recently at a conference on psychoanalysis and colonialism. The conversation centered in part on trying to define the *post* in *postcolonial*. The best we could agree upon was “everything that happened after colonialism.” But when did colonialism happen, and when did modernity emerge? European history tells us that the advent of modernity was in 1648, with the Treaty of Westphalia. Europe moved from religious to secular societies through the emergence of sovereignty—each nation-state was entitled to its own religious self-determination, as it were. Carl Schmitt redates the advent of European modernity to 1492, noting that the European family of nations consolidated themselves precisely by externalizing violence outward into the New World with “discovery” of the Americas. So 1648 and 1492 are inextricable. So, too, are problems of globalism and colonialism.

I was telling a friend about the book sprint, and I realized that we were in the fourth generation of *Social Text*. [Gestures toward the younger people in the room.] A fourth iteration of tracing political economies: first generation focused on postindustrial and transnational capital; second generation explored global capital and the cultural turn to issues such as gender and sex; I'm part of the “queer” third generation investigating race and sex in the context of the neoliberalism and multiculturalism, coloniality and diaspora, and affect and assemblage. The fourth generation I see very much as dealing with trans and digital politics under globalism. Each generation has a different relation to political economy, culture, and modes of sex and race. I even think of this book sprint and the collective production along the lines of trans and enduring issues of borders. It is about collective platforms and problems of technology. This book sprint form we are using is indexed to that fourth generation but is also very historical. Google Docs, the very form that we have chosen to produce this issue, has a history. If digital networks are the contemporary form in which we exist, how are we negotiating that in the form of the book sprint we are using? How do we negotiate the relationship between writing as a private voice versus publishing as a public process? Especially as this is a collective project that isn't about extraction, but about a commons?



**Tavia Nyong'o:** If we spend too much time thinking about the process, I fear we will lose our process. I think we should focus on the heterotopia of the Google Doc.

### **Day 5 Onward**

We began to transition from creating to editing mode, reviewing, revising, reorganizing our work in pairs. By the end of the day we had about forty-five thousand words and an agreement that we would reconvene on a video call after two weeks: one week to clean things up, and one week for everyone to read the whole text. The reality is we arrived to that video conference without significant progress; it was nearly impossible to work on the project remotely. We agreed to meet again for one more full day of editing. Five of us were in person at NYU, and the rest of us were online. By the end of that day, most of the text was complete. This final day confirmed what we knew all along: our writing was social. We needed the conviviality, collective discipline, and immediate dialogue that our writing together had enabled. When we were alone, everyone's work became no one's work.

## Notes

1. Book Sprints Limited, “What Is a Book Sprint?,” [www.booksprints.net/about/](http://www.booksprints.net/about/) (accessed 2 June 2017).
2. Arie Altena, “Book Sprinting with Adam Hyde,” [v2.nl/archive/articles/interview-with-adam-hyde](http://v2.nl/archive/articles/interview-with-adam-hyde) (accessed 2 June 2017).
3. Erkalovic et al., *Collaborative Futures*.
4. 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: “**H**ere and **N**ow” in the text, since the erasure itself is what we want to convey.
5. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

## References

- Erkalovic, Aleksandar, Adam Hyde, kanarinka, Mike Linksvayer, Michael Mandiberg, Marta Peirano, sissu tarka, Astra Taylor, Alan Toner, and Mushon Zer-Aviv Hyde. 2011. *Collaborative Futures*. Amsterdam: FLOSSmanuals Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.