

Writing to Change How We Think

Once upon a time, the weapons of criticism were honed against the absolutist state. In what direction do they now tilt? If the power is capillary and micropolitical now, does that mean all criticism is directed at (parts of) ourselves? What would it take to become ungovernable in the present conjuncture? We began where we were, writing out of the belly of the beast, on the island of Manhattan. What would it take, some of us wondered, to free ourselves of the debilitating provincialism of this location? Conversely, how can we present for and be accountable to the communities of struggle—"the resistance," as it openly calls itself—now responding to New York City–bred Trumpism and a new paranoid style of American fascism? The organized Right in America now has liberal academia—which it calls the campus Left—in its sights again. For them, the *free* of free speech is the *free* of the free market, and if they have their way, we will all have the freedom to starve from the diet of propaganda spewed out by Breitbart/Fox News. Call it fascism or call it corporatism: the merger of state and industry through a hostile takeover, with populist outrage targeting "liberal elites" and "campus radicals" as a smokescreen for the radical and elitist depredations of the Right. And yet, to take the bait and defend the indefensible corporate academy would be in itself a form of negligence. Caught somewhere between the violent deskilling and real subsumption of intellectual labor, on the one hand, and generational transition on the other, we have nothing left to lose but our overreliance on cheap cliché and quick sloganeering.

The form of this experiment is not innovative but rather quotidian, we suspect, for much "content generation" that is directed toward the web and elsewhere. And yet it was an experiment for us, from us. In search of a model of "abstraction without extraction," we intentionally risked using the tools of corporatized collaboration. We composed initial drafts collectively in real time using Google Docs, facility with which knowledge workers have become accustomed to as the price of admission

to that ambiguous feeling: “productive work is happening.” But to do so from within a tradition of left tendency is to place this particular aspect of the here and now under erasure. Several times in its history, the meaning of the phrase *social text* has overtaken the editorial collective and journal that still bear this name. Years ago, when we launched our first website, we posited a potential symmetry between our name and what the web and/or hypertext was (i.e., a social text). That formulation seems far too simple now (or was already then), but at least it nudged us out of a knee-jerk defense of the stubborn islands of academic privilege in a rising sea of digital information. How far out to sea are we now?

We placed many ideas on the table. Should we renumberate the journal to mark its rededication to another new moment, allowing a fourth generation to assume the reins and invest it with their singular passions? One collective member even urged us to rename the journal, which would be almost tantamount to starting a new one (which leftists have a tendency to do). Others assert that we do not need to change the name, because the context in which that name resonates is always changing. Rather than top down, we opt for bottom up (for now), rattling our intellectual and (for the greater part) academic cages. We take a gamble that collective writing can change the way we think and that, furthermore, changing the way we think can be a contribution—a “small act” or a “small ax”—in a more general insurrection to come, or one already under way. We even decided to vary our use of *we*: sometimes it is *some of us*, sometimes it is *you*, sometimes it is *I*. Rather than a manifesto (Latin *manifestus*, to make plain and evident, often in relation to proving a crime) our collective work has been closer to an *obfuscaro*, if we may be forgiven for coining a term for a darkly optimistic, collectively authored document of uncertain provenance, intended above all to thicken the plot rather than to serve as marching orders.

Many of us, after all, have migrated to this island from all over the world, and we are embedded in remittance economies of debt and obligation that keep us attuned to other time zones, other national-populars, other points in the global supply chain, other killing fields, other revolutionary timelines. If we take refuge in the collective plural pronoun, it is in order to discover a way out of our exhaustion with the critical vocabularies we inherited from a long tradition of efforts to destroy racial capitalism and to decolonize our futures. It is knowing that we do so as idiosyncratic individuals, rather than individuals, who bring to the collective a unity that is other than the sum of its parts, that leads us to query the grammar of our own convening.

What can proceed from an acknowledgment of our positioning at one apex of the academic knowledge industries that still relies on a brain drain from other, often more radical, sometimes more conserva-

tive, national academies? At the outset of this exercise we committed ourselves to at least try to eschew the field formation and disciplinary policing that preoccupies those who still seem to believe that there is something redeemable about the corporate academy. And yet, as we attempt to write out from under philosophy, theory, expertise, and the other master terms that seek to direct and denature our spiritual strivings, we still have to take the measure of a here and now in which academic cultural capital, as the younger among us say, is “still a thing.”

Recently, there was a vogue for roundtables at the conferences we go to that deployed the ammunition of academic star power to “kill” a variety of keywords. Having enthusiastically participated in this killing spree, some of us wonder now: what animates this exasperation with critical language such that it manifests in the violently decathecting metaphor of killing something off, as if we would breathe a sigh of relief when the expert terminology some of us slogged through grad school to master were dead and buried (preferably, before we ourselves are)?¹ When queer feminist theory can be parodied by the *Onion*, do we feel triumph or deflation at the weightless circulation or affectless parroting of diction and syntax that was possibly meant to rewire the way we all think? What do the weapons of criticism mean when they can be turned upon us in blank parody of our hopes for a less violent world?

“Trump Voter Feels Betrayed by President after Reading 800 Pages of Queer Feminist Theory.” Like every other successful *Onion* parody article or video, the joke works because a headline pitched at a staff meeting was a gift that kept on giving. We are in our own writing room now, fighting back, even though we fear the *Onion* can write circles around us. But why would we be in that ring to begin with? Unlike the suspense of a punch line in a standup comedy routine, the snarky humor of the *Onion* arrives in the form of a one-liner that lures you in with the promise of more howling. There is no end to the joke (if you get it), it goes on and on



Figure 1. A screenshot from the *Onion*

until the giggling fit ceases. The “killing joke” (“laughter fit to kill,” in the African Americanist tradition brought to light by Mel Watkins and more recently by Glenda Carpio) presents a certain promise of happiness—a brief respite of restorative idiocy—even amid the ongoing horror show.² A certain platonic ideal of such satire is reached when it becomes perfectly indifferent, as the queer-feminist-theory-reading Trump-voter article seems to us, to which side of the political divide you fall upon. That is to say, you are the butt of the joke, whether or not you, like us, have slogged through those eight hundred pages, or even contributed modestly toward that page count. By showing the comedy in instrumentalizing theory, the *Onion* kills more than a keyword; it goes after an entire tradition of moral seriousness and philosophical rigor with a chainsaw. Or is it a joy buzzer? We may have to “shake hands with the fact” of a Trump presidency, as a certain Hollywood actor who is now dead to us has said. But that doesn’t mean we relinquish our right to laugh, even at ourselves.

Writing in a special issue on comedy, Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai note:

In this era of proliferating social fractures the presence of comedy as weapon and shield, pedagogy and performance, saturates the most ordinary spaces. Arpad Szakolczai calls this a demand and laments the “commodification” of the public sphere. While the Bakhtinian account of carnival’s permission for the grotesque to disrupt social hierarchy still obtains, the affective labor of the comedic as a socially lubricating mood commandeers comedy to enable the very contradictions and stresses to which it also points. How should we understand comedy differently, and how does comedy stage its own anxiety-producing/alleviating, social-distance-gauging missions differently, if people are increasingly supposed to be funny all the time?³

If humor is one way of lampooning intellectual verbosity through an illustrative concision (witty headline takes down eight hundred pages of theory in six-second stunner, news at eleven), poetry may be another. But how do we read and write poetry now, and how does it change the way we feel about what theory, criticism, and interventionist scholarship we write and how we write it? *Social Text* has recently begun again publishing poetry on its website and occasionally in print. Our fateful encounter with José Esteban Muñoz and Fred Moten at Thomas Hirschorn’s “Gramsci Monument” was in retrospect an opening salvo.⁴ How do we think about the event of the poem now? Is poetry a complement, corrective, or challenge to the jargon mongering we stand accused of? Will verse write us out of the dock?

One critical model would be Amy Berkowitz’s *Tender Points*, a hybrid essay/poem. Berkowitz, a poet who writes in a community of other poets, writes that she’s eschewing poetry for prose so that her writing will

be taken seriously. And she writes about her rape in relation to disability: fibromyalgia, a “women’s disease” that is continually discounted by media, medical experts, and coworkers.⁵ She oscillates between the commitment to prose that she describes at the beginning of the book and line breaks and listicles and other less “masculine” forms of writing. Something about the seriousness of her subject matter demands the hybrid genre. And another would be the redescription the word *fiction* receives in Diana Hamilton’s essay “On Fictional Poetry.”⁶ We could also call these fictions *topics*, *theorizations*, *fabulations*, or *sense*. We don’t know.

We dust off, or open for the first time, treatises and manuals of prosody, in search of a science or, failing that, a method to aid in our quest for the flesh made word. We worry, at moments, that “poetic” can be a gesture of dismissal when it comes to intellectual work. Just like calling someone’s work “beautiful” can contain the mild implication that they are getting away with something. Poetic and beautiful work is ineffable and ephemeral—like the long laugh from the *Onion* but different: it does something in the world that cannot be exactly measured or accounted for. The no-account poet is accountable to no one; we aspire to and resent their exemption from the committee meeting. Communism, we quote from elsewhere, is free time and nothing else. Communism is free time to write poetry, which is not a luxury but could be.

The rhapsodic and lyric mode into which critique gravitates when it heads in the direction called poetic is left in a rhythm of yes, yes, but. Dusting off our Deleuze, we distinguish three kinds of syntheses: the connective, the conjunctive, and the disjunctive. (We pause to admire the word *virus* that poetically animated the good philosopher, which caused him to write in spirals, convolutes, plateaus, and mille-feuille rather than in chapters. We fuck with philosophy.) Poetry’s reception is conjunctive (and, and) and then disjunctive (but, but). Unlike the belly laugh that simply peters away, the *but* that appears at the tail end of a good poetic rhapsody interests us theoretically and practically. What is that objection? Not to the poem itself, or to the little breathing space it has opened up for us, but objection to the compulsive or compulsory way of being we had to be jolted out of in order to find it.

And, by the way, fuck mindfulness. We want more other-mindfulness, more collective head, more reasons not to be a single, death-driven, rent-seeking, capitalist-acquisitive being. Even as we are tempted to suspend hostilities toward certain academic keywords, we open fire on another front: the profusion of goodspeak spilling out of TED talks, corporate retreats, airport bestsellers, and Davos man pretending to rescue America from Davos man. We must be mindful of Davos man, who is parachuting his SWAT team of innovators into the entrails of the US war machine as we speak. Our comrade at *Keywords for the Age of Austerity* clocked him



Figure 2. Davos Man

for us: “The meanness and graft that always lurks closely behind ‘innovation’ discourse in government is just so much more out in the open here.”⁷

From Stephen Collis, by way of Commune Editions (a purveyor of poetry and other antagonisms), we adopt the stray image of poetry as riot dog who accompanies “the movement of the streets, providing support and strangeness, and perhaps, on occasion, biting the leg of a cop.”⁸ This corroborative and intensifying relation to the movement is no doubt sometimes aspirational, but it gives us another star to steer by, and is preferable to the sobering alternative of “accessible writing.” We find the call to write more accessibly to have

a spectrum of political and ideological valences, but too often it assumes away the grounds upon which writing could actually be an act or doing in the world. The flip side of the parodic image of the Trump-voting working-class white man who slogs through eight hundred pages of feminist queer theory in order to change his mind is the real image of the gender outlaw immigrant ducking ICE for whom those same pages, or some scattered leaves torn from them, could be needed tools to mind her change. Poetry is not a luxury, Audre Lorde insisted, because it is available (which is not the same as accessible) in rooms and covert transactions that subvert citizenship.⁹

We are with and for copyleft, of course. But what did Aaron Swartz want us to do with all those JSTOR pdfs, exactly? Swartz, you may remember, was the young hacker who committed suicide in despair after being charged with a crime for downloading academic articles using MIT’s network. He died because he thought someone who couldn’t pay for this would want to read this; how do we attain a conception of our collective project that might live up to this understudent demand? Perhaps it is not that he is in our readership but we who are, potentially, his readers. One friend confesses to another: I never read journal articles anymore.

It's just too much. On a television satire of academic art-world pretention, an influential critic played by Kevin Bacon says he hasn't read a book in a decade: he is postidea.

The great cultural speedup of mental labor serves as backdrop to this new allure of poetry and the poetic as a space of slow, precise, careful thought. We know that some working poets scoff at these characterizations of their craft and look to a variety of conceptual strategies to generate poems. But this is an essay not about poetry but about writing to change how we think. It has embraced, at least for now, mess as method. Messy method is a meter-making argument. How do we use the words of disciplines; how do we methodically imitate the word discipline of the scholars that therefore we are? I cannot be the only one who periodically cracks under the strain of translating English into English. That is to say, the overlooked undercommons is invisibilized by an imperial university that legislates language in the long shadow of the nation-state (more or less), that interposes the language exam and the rigorously fictional "near-native speaker" between students and teachers and other boundary crossers. Language acquisition is a slow labor to change the way we think. Does the deskilling and demystification of translation by Google Translate present any opportunities for hacking the patrimonial-linguistic form? Conversely, how do we take seriously the linguistic recolonization that machine translation effects? We labor under the thesis of communicative capitalism, according to which Jodi Dean holds that any digitally recorded trace whatsoever is immediately apprehended as value for Alphabet, Inc. and its corporate rivals.¹⁰ We return to our mother's gardens, in search of the vibrant matter of another axiology.

Materialities matter, although we can be forgiven if we are a little skeptical of the immaculate conception of supposedly *new* materialisms. "New materialisms" in Wikipedia, in a subtle shade, redirects to "Materialism." Matters were at hand all along, waiting for our novelty to catch up with their still movement. The search for a sense, matter, or meaning in postconceptual poetry rhymes with the search for a poetic moment in the academic discourse. We are writing to change the way we think, but when we get to the other side of the shore, what have we carried there on our backs? A certain poetics privileges "the image," and so we ask, what does poetry see? And is it always what the AI sees?

Ways to Change How We Write and Think

1. Experiment with pronouns. There are ongoing skirmishes between the "use more *I* statements" camp and the "feelings aren't facts" camp. Instead of adopting one system, move around and write your way into the discomfort of what feels "wrong" for you.

2. Imagine your grandmother reporting to her best friend about what it is you've been writing, while she is at a protest rally.
3. Read your prose aloud slowly. Get a computer to read your prose aloud slowly in a range of funny accents.
4. Read poetry.
5. Write graffiti.
6. Experiment with autocomplete Oulipo.¹¹
7. Write an article for submission to a scholarly journal using the surrealist technique of "exquisite corpse."
8. Write an article or entire issue of a scholarly journal using a version of Terence Hayes's technique, in homage of Gwendolyn Brooks, of the golden shovel.¹²

Notes

This essay was written collaboratively as part of a book sprint. See "How This Text Was Written" (in this issue) for more information on the process.

1. Jennifer Nash makes a comparable point in her review essay "Intersectionality and Its Discontents."
2. Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill*; Watkins, *On the Real Side*; Leary, "On Jared Kushner's New After-school Project."
3. Berlant and Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues."
4. Muñoz, "Event of the Poem," 119–21.
5. Berkowitz, *Tender Points*.
6. Hamilton, "On Fictional Poetry."
7. Leary, "On Jared Kushner's New After-school Project."
8. Collis, "On Embedded Poetry."
9. Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury."
10. Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*.
11. See, e.g., the autocomplete Oulipo experiments published under the Twitter handle @AutoOulipo and many other poetry experiments on Twitter.
12. Kahn, Shankar, and Smith, *Golden Shovel Anthology*. We have no idea how to convert this poetical device to prose. But we do not yet know what a group of bodies can do.

References

- Berkowitz, Amy. 2015. *Tender Points*. Oakland, CA: Timeless Infinite Light.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Sianne Ngai. 2017. "Comedy Has Issues." *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2: 233–49.
- Carpio, Glenda. 2008. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Collis, Stephen. 2015. "On Embedded Poetry." *Jacket2*, 7 August. jacket2.org/article/embedded-poetry.
- Dean, Jodi. 2009. *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hamilton, Diana. 2016. "On Fictional Poetry." [Poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org), 6 June, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2016/06/on-fictional-poetry>.

- Kahn, Peter, Ravi Shankar, and Patricia Smith, eds. 2017. *The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press.
- Leary, John Patrick. 2017. "On Jared Kushner's New After-school Project, the White House Office of American Innovation." *Keywords for the Age of Austerity*, 27 March. theageofausterity.wordpress.com/2017/03/27/on-jared-kushners-new-after-school-project-the-white-house-office-of-american-innovation/.
- Lorde, Audre. (1984) 2007. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." In *Sister Outsider*, 36–39. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. 2014. "The Event of the Poem: The Gramsci Monument." *Social Text* 32, no. 1: 119–21.
- Nash, Jennifer. 2017. "Intersectionality and Its Discontents." *American Quarterly* 69, no. 1: 117–29.
- Watkins, Mel. 1994. *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying*. New York: Simon and Schuster.