

Minding Our Language

A Can of Words

Let's end where we started, with prepositions. We came to the writing of this collective issue with nothing more than a title, a provisional one at that, and one we ultimately chose to set aside: "After Globalism." *After* is a temporal preposition; we might, equally, have chosen a spatial one, say, "*Beyond* Globalism." As metaphors, both prepositions express our collective desire to sand away the encrustation of assumptions and formulaic thinking attached to the concept of the global—to ask what happens after we've named it, and to see whether we can get at the worlds that lie beyond it.

But this doesn't mean that we considered *after* and *beyond* to be interchangeable terms, any more than we would claim that terms such as *race* and *gender* are interchangeable.¹ Like constructs of identity, metaphors remain anchored in the material world from which they take flight. This becomes clear when we commute our language from one dimension to another, when we shift the rhetorical basis from time to space. Take the term *late capitalism*. If you object to the optimistic periodization it assumes, think about how much more infelicitous a term like *distant capitalism* sounds.

"*Beyond* Globalism" was, we thought, an unhelpful title because it suggests that all we need to do, as leftist thinkers, is get over it—not to put it in the past but to move past it, to identify and then cross some magical intellectual threshold, finding ourselves in a mental domain where the contradictions of capital and empire no longer affect us. To move beyond is to move to a higher plane; what we want, to borrow Donna Haraway's title, is to stay with the trouble.² To stay here, in other words. To remain present.

This is why we preferred the temporal inflection of the title, "*After* Globalism." It holds us in the world. It poses a question—okay, what now?—to those among us who want to speak as politically engaged intellectuals but who get caught in a mental loop when we try to answer ques-

tions about why the world is the way it is. It stems from the feeling that if the answer is always “because globalization” (to borrow a commonplace millennial grammatical construction), then what’s the point of asking the question? What’s the point of saying anything?

What’s more, to say *after* globalism, placing conceptualizations of global society in a temporal frame, we deliberately refuse a spatialized understanding of the global. No matter how complex and nonbinary spatial models try to be (Arjun Appadurai’s “scapes,” Roland Robertson’s “glocalism”), they fall very easily into a dichotomous, nondialectical, reifying mentality: there is this thing called the global, and it looks like this, and there is this thing called the local, and it looks like this.

To place a the temporal frame around the word *globalism* is also to acknowledge that terms wear out their welcome; their meaning gets diluted through their perpetual invocation, so that they become little more than academic shoptalk. Take *neoliberalism*. It’s a term that has become a placeholder for the dominant hegemonic system. To grasp this, consider the following passage, the first sentences of a famous essay by Fredric Jameson. One word has been changed.

The last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the “crisis” of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.): taken together, all of these perhaps constitute what is increasingly called neoliberalism. The case for its existence depends on the hypothesis of some radical break or *coupure*, generally traced back to the end of the 1950s or the early 1960s.³

What is the change? We replaced the word *postmodernism* with the word *neoliberalism*.

So let’s be careful out there, on the mean streets of academic publishing, littered with pdf files. Words can make a difference, not only because they can be powerful but also because they can be banal and, worse, obfuscating. We don’t want to use words without locating them within history and geography, which is to say, within the spaces and times from which culture draws its meaning at a given moment, at any given here and now.

Another way of saying this is that radical thought and writing can’t let themselves lapse into formulaic critiques of power. So let’s go back to *neoliberalism*—let’s talk about why it is an exhausted term. As we’ve already specified, the problem is how easily it substitutes for other *isms* in the syntax of cultural critique. But more than that, it is exhausted because it can account for only certain kinds of institutions and cultural practices. Specifically, diagnosing everything as a case of neoliberalism makes it

harder to understand the history of minoritarian work, much less engage with it.

Take #BlackLivesMatter. Of course, it's possible to say that the larger context for its emergence is the neoliberal crisis agenda. This agenda keeps on winning, one website notes, "because neoliberalism is a lifestyle that brushes aside life—that sees death as trauma that can be profited from."⁴ But at the same time, to see the movement only through the neoliberalism filter is to participate in the long history wherein black suffering has meaning only as it is instrumentalized in a struggle that goes "beyond" systemic racial violence and dehumanizing bodily pain. Black deaths remain unmourned.

Neoliberalism on the eye level is desperate and horrible, but we can't let it become the only story we tell about people living within it. If, as Neferti X. M. Tadiar notes, labor time is being replaced by life-time in the global economy of servitude and expendability, then radical thinking's task is to render concrete the kinds of reckoning involved when we refer to lives in the abstract, when life-time is extracted as raw material for the creation of value.⁵ Her point is amply illustrated by the following passage, an extract from a paper titled "Intelligent Distribution and Logistics," written by two experts in supply chain management—the neoliberal science par excellence. It offers us a vision of the biopolitical capture of the global South as servant to the Western consumer imperium, in the first instance as a low-wage extraction workforce, and in the second, as an army of immigrant caretakers:

If China and India progress to be nations of consumers, then who will become the centres of low cost manufacturing and service operations? One possibility, if current efforts prove fruitful, is that sub-Saharan Africa will progress beyond its current challenges and take up this role. Given the geographic proximity to Europe, the cost of transportation would be considerably lower, as would wage expectations of employees. Further, most of these countries (notably DRC) have huge potential in terms of mineral wealth that will mean that they cannot continue to exist in relative economic isolation. . . .

If birth rates continue to fall as they are currently doing in the developed world, what are the implications of this in terms of the dominant consumer groups who will operate the services that cannot be off-shore, and what type of products will they require? An aged population with high numbers of immigrant labour that provides the services that they require and becomes a new dominant consumer group in their own right, is one scenario.⁶

Note how the first paragraph refers explicitly to the Democratic Republic of the Congo—the source of the mineral ore known as coltan, which is

necessary for making iPhones and other miniaturized devices for communication, computation, and data-gathering. Rather than see the mineral wealth of the DRC for what it is—a source of immense immiseration, the center of a lawless, violence-ridden economy of extraction that destroys lives—the authors of this proposal see it only as an as yet unintegrated component of capitalist democracy’s necessary growth.

But it is the second paragraph that gives us the tools to understand this biologicistic language fully. Think about what it means to be a carer, to take a job as a carer, in a “First World” country. It means wiping white people’s butts. Logistics, the protection of supply chains and the defense of trade against competition, ensures that not only the toilet paper but also the person paid to do the wiping get to their destination with minimal disruption and at the lowest possible cost.

Care, however, is not simply a means for subsuming the life-times of the oppressed into the system of global exchange. The problem with an analytics based on neoliberalism is that it would have us believe that this is the whole story. Put another way, to focus on the neoliberal logics of care is to prioritize the diagnostic powers of white lefty academics who signal their solidarity with the oppressed by saying *folks* instead of *people*. The concept of care also encompasses the need to do “wake work,” as Christina Sharpe calls a black ethics of care and self care.⁷ Wake work involves an openness toward the pain of others; it involves the creation of sanctuary and respect for its boundaries; it acknowledges vulnerability and the need to protect and be protected. These are political affects and practices that narratives of neoliberal dominance obscure. They do not exist in a pure space beyond power. But if we are to understand them, we need terms that encompass forms of value and political personhood that take shape outside liberal capitalist rationalities.

Care. Sanctuary. Vulnerability. Fragility. These terms push us to consider the moral economies that exist alongside neoliberal economies and, at times, are enabled by them or do their work. The rise of the global Right, after all, often seems premised upon a moral economy of repair. Reparation, so crucial for the work of minoritized subjects, is now also capable, if only as an idea, of mobilizing racist *ressentiment*. (And liberal self-appeasement: fascists won over a third of the French electoral vote in 2017, yet people (folks?) still sent out golly-gee e-mails saying “*Vive la France!*”)

The process of writing this issue involved examining the terms we use to talk about the present moment. What we discovered is that a certain set of ideas, some of them addressed in the foregoing, structured our mental efforts to go *after globalism*. For example, we realized that we could not do without the term *extraction*, the word designating a concept that is central not only to Marx’s conception of value but also to the material

processes that give rise to environmental, indeed planetary, destruction. But neither could we do without the language of affect and mood as we grappled with the sense of being “present” wrapped up in the Here and the Now. Nor could we have said what we wanted to say without a constant awareness of infrastructures and their endless failures. Without the power of unaccustomed forms of speech, like muttering and anecdote. Perhaps the heterogeneity of our terms reflects our heterogeneity as a writing collective. Or—or and—perhaps it reflects the diversity of mental resources available to leftist intellectuals who want to open up the conversation and be surprised by the results, much as indulgent adults accept the can of peanuts that a seven-year-old offers to them, only to discover that they have opened up an exploding can of worms.

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. To the reader who extracts this article from a database, the first sentence may not make sense. So, FYI, this is the final article in the aforementioned issue.

1. Such historically fallacious claims are most visible, these days, in the discipline of analytical philosophy. A recent article in the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* drew strenuous objections from feminist philosophers of color and trans-identified scholars when it claimed to promote the social acceptability of what it calls “transracialism”—white people identifying as black. It advanced its argument by asserting an analogy between this hypothetical social practice (which it localized in the rather singular, if highly publicized, example of one individual, Rachel Dolezal) and what it called “transgenderism.” In short, it claimed that if we accept the idea that some individuals can “change sexes,” then we must also accept the possibility that others can “change races.” In response, commentators concerned with freedom of speech described these objections, which were accompanied by demands that the journal’s editors take action, as a “witch hunt.”

No doubt there exists within the *Social Text* editorial collective a range of opinions on this matter. Rather than weigh in on the editorial collective’s behalf, we take our cue from the movie *Trolls*. Just as Princess Poppy resolves arguments by saying, “We’re both right!,” our response to these disputants is, modestly, to say that we defend and respect the right of analytic philosophy to be a politically useless, frequently toxic, mode of discourse. See Tuvel, “In Defense of Transracialism”; McKenzie, “Journal’s Board Disavows Apology”; and Harris, “Black like Who?”

2. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

3. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1. Quotation intentionally altered as noted in text.

4. Jasdye, “Crisis Neoliberalism and Black Lives Matter.”

5. Tadiar, “Life-times of Disposability in Global Neoliberalism.”

6. Harrison and White, “Intelligent Distribution and Logistics,” 178–79.

7. Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

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