# Social Text

**Alondra Nelson**

> On the level of the politics of what-is-said and on the level of the politics of how-it-is-said there are indications of a systematic reflection on the *management* of contradiction . . . contained within the utopian program of the New Right. The procedures of this containment not only indicate the range of the New Right's politics, but the scene upon which must intervene a new oppositional practice.
> —Madison Social Text Group, "The New Right and Media," *ST* 1 (1979)

In the foundational first issue of *Social Text*, the editorial collective "propose[d] a fresh exploration of those cultural 'texts' . . . which constitute fundamental vehicles for ideological programming and legitimation in American society" through the application of new modes of critique to an expansive range of social objects and practices. Traversing and dialectically articulating disciplines and genres, the rejuvenation of Marxist cultural analysis inaugurated in *ST* 1 (1979) also attended to its mediation, in a fashion related to yet also categorically distinct from how mass culture had been previously treated by Left theorists. For example, by both design and prescience, this issue's "Prospectus" notably set the pace for inquiry into postwar technoculture. Since this time, the journal's editorial trajectory has reflected a commitment to a distinctive and comprehensive analytics of politics and media that, taking inspiration from an article in the inaugural issue exemplifying it, might be termed *social textronics*.

In "The New Right and Media" (*ST* 1), an examination of the backlash hastened by the advances of progressive social movements The Madison Social Text Group (MSTG) limned the emergence in the late 1960s of a national conservative network comprising "various single-issue

campaigns"—including the anti–welfare state referendum Proposition 13 in California and numerous "anti-abortion, anti-gay rights, anti-ERA and affirmative action" initiatives—and unified in their mobilization of both an imagined halcyon past and "media politics." (Combining contributions from individual and paired authors into a single-essay format, this piece reflected the editorial collective's commitment to cooperative praxis and, in this way, also served as a template of sorts for *ST* 100.) By 1979 this network had evolved into a reactionary technocultural line of attack that would yield a Reagan presidential victory and decades later would usher Karl Rove, a leading proponent of this strategy, from Texas machine politics to the brain trust of the George W. Bush White House. This conservative countermovement media blitz, the MSTG argued, included "computerized," mass direct mailing for the solicitation of money (a tactic conceived by right-wing ideologue Richard Viguerie, called the "funder of conservatism," and later adopted by Rove); "the creation of an electronic network of groups and individuals"; "the appropriation of mass cultural programs and devices," such as the now ubiquitous conservative talk radio circuit; and the use of "corporate advertising in defense of business ideologies," among other tactics.

As one form of rejoinder, in a section of "The New Right and Media" that ran under the heading "Textronics," the MSTG excavated political messages intertwined in the content ("what-is-said") and form ("how-it-is said") of conservative media and exposed how these narratives functioned as ideological facade. Textronics referenced how advertisements for office equipment, electronics, and aeronautics sold by the Textron Corporation were ideological devices through which the merchandise was encysted within a sentimental representation of an idealized past in an effort to reconcile and manage the contradictions inherent to the conditions of its production under advanced capitalism. More generally, *textronics* also referred to the broader terrain of Right cultural politics and underscored the "symbiotic" relationship of these with "the technology of new media."

In response to the Right's broadening bandwidth, the MSTG suggested a social-textronics analysis of the Left. A critical approach that began in the journal as theory and now extends to the editorial collective's own media praxis as well, social textronics reflects an appreciation for technoculture's bilateralism—its potential both to embody conservative ideologies and to advance progressive politics. From this perspective, technologies are not only tools of production and domination and ideological vectors (longstanding preoccupations of the Left), but are also heuristics—via "information and systems theory"—and

can be vehicles for socio-political affiliation and, potentially, ideological resistance.

Following "The New Right and Media," subsequent articles in *Social Text* similarly toggled between appraisals of the political vices and virtues of technoculture, analog and digital. On the more pessimistic end of the spectrum, Tizziana Terranova in *ST* 80 (2000) observes that, in the age of information, workers contribute to their very own subjugation, as wage labor is transformed into "free labor" or "forms of labor we do not immediately recognize as such." Moreover, Terranova cautions that Internet culture, abetted by ideological discourses of freedom that are a dominant narrative frame of new media advertising campaigns (not unlike the Textron ads) as well as allegedly libratory practices such as the open source movement, masks exploitation as pleasure and idle consumption as production and renders consumers' continuous, unpaid toil as agency.

Yet, other works in the journal have suggested agentive possibilities. In conversation with Constance Penley and Andrew Ross in *ST* 24/25 (1990), social theorist Donna Haraway proposed that Left positions on technoculture need not be solely condemning. As she remarked, "We can't afford the versions of the 'one-dimensional-man' critique of technological rationality, which is to say, we can't turn scientific discourses into the Other, and make them into the enemy." Haraway's influential "Cyborg Manifesto" is a locus classicus of how technology embodies both social reality and "social fiction," of how it can bring the *what is* of material domination into starkest relief and concomitantly pose the "radically liberating," socialist-feminist utopian questions *What if*? and *What could be*?

The progression of social textronics in the journal is also evoked by Rosalind Morris's recent incisive examination in *ST* 91 (2007) of the gruesome digital photographs of blithely executed torture at the U.S. Abu Ghraib camp. Her analysis partly extends Jean Baudrillard's observations about how bellicose imperialism is abstracted through video-game aesthetics (e.g., single-shooter perspective, radar, virtual reality). On the other hand, the "mediatization" of images of this abuse, their circulation on the Internet and in the news media, Morris asserts, served in some measure to "circumvent the processes of concealment and dissimulation by which (anachronistic) state powers try to maintain their hold on knowledge."

This Left media politics, the social textronics, highlighted in *ST* by Haraway, Terranova, Morris, and others is more an ideological lockstep operation than a system override, to borrow computing language. Nevertheless, interrupting the techniques of consensus manufacture, gumming

the machine works, and fashioning alternative circuitry continue to be vital "oppositional practices" of the Left and important themes in *Social Text*. Indeed, the technolocultural work of the editorial collective itself now includes a Web site (http://socialtextonline.org/) and a wiki on which drafts of this hundredth issue were circulated.