

# Writing Alone Together: Making Sense of Lockdown Through Hundreds

- November 24, 2020



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## Introduction

In late May, we established a tentative online writing project called The Hundreds. Adapting Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart’s project of the **same name**, our format has been to react to covid-lives in flash writing form – writing in 100-word multiples. Berlant and Stewart’s work flowed from their “Public Feelings Project”, where peers wrote on a “scene, thing, or situation” before reading the one hundred words aloud, and listening, “compositionally.” We have been meeting online, fortnightly, since June and sharing our work – on everyday encounters, conversations with theory, and daydreams – reading aloud to each other and sharing a live online document. Our website shows some of our examples [here](#).

Much of what we have written below has also been adapted from fragments of these Hundreds. Here, we want to dwell with the possibilities that [the

method of?] hundred-ing presents to us, rather than the content of our experiments, but the examples on our website give a sense of the multifarious nature of our topics: the nature of zoom, writing that feels like kayaking, and a love affair with Milton Keynes are some spoilers.

### **What do Hundreds do?**

The lockdown forced a reckoning. Lives in which the boundary between work and home-life had been blurring were breached. Domestic space was encroached upon like never before as work came home. The cry of living from work was made along with many other such formations. While we can question how, for many, this was anything new – the domestic space obviously never was a place free from the structures of work – something did shift. This had various connotations both positive and negative. Time was sapped and run dry, spaces overburdened with roles. The work self, a prominent self for many, lost some of its form, slipped into the other selves.

In their Manifesto for **Live Methods, Les Back and Nirmal Puwar (2012)** describe the early history of sociological methods as being characterised by the “move from the armchair to the field”.

For us, as [pre-]early-career researchers with all the bloats and lulls that come with this already-not-quite position, we stumbled into hundred-ing as a way to engage collaboratively with the liminality of lockdown life. Hundreds kept us alive to relations, beyond our immediate surroundings, when the armchair *became* the field.

*Socialising* live methods through shared constrained writing – in a period of unprecedented constraint – affected how we understand both lockdown and research.

### **Writing alone together**

Writing Hundreds was a method of being alone together. A way of reflecting on our enclosures and the blurring of life and work, in lockdown. Over time, however, our Hundreds were constructed in relation to other hundreds. It was also a form which encouraged moments of sharing. Sharing by reading to each other and sharing ideas for what a hundred can be or do. Sharing where to go next.

We didn't write collaboratively – every word together – but alone and shared. We retained total control of our individual hundreds, control over when and where they were written – rushed on the day of our meeting, or ruminated over for days prior. Even in sharing – reading aloud each contribution online – they retained mystery: we didn't know how much each of us had agonised over a word or sentence. What was cut up.

We wrote with differing stakes in the boundaries of sociology. Although the Hundreds allowed for autonomy and exchange across disciplines and creative interests, the project wasn't characterised by a live 'call-and-response' exactly, 'whereby materials are passed and returned, transformed, only to be carried over to the next practitioner involved in the relay of co-production' (**Puwar and Sharma, 2012**).

### **Practicing citation**

In the website design we engaged with one further feature of Berlant and Stewart's (and consequently our) work – that of citational experimentation. By pulling references out from in-text, and spreading them out on the left hand side – to the first point of our readers' view – we call attention to how **"things we thought with"** drive writing in ways, orders and forms not commonly acknowledged in a traditional reference list.

We played on this slippage through citational practices. Following Ahmed (**2013**), Tuck (**2015**), Cheuk (**2017**) and others, we ask what is it to name our archive? As the boundaries around work and life broke anew we engaged with this centre stage; both in writing and in presentation, questions of. Giving equal place to traditional textual sources and more obscurist, fleeting or imagined objects of reference – an inscription in a book, Big Brother: 1997–2018, destructive habits of Twitter browsing. What would it mean to let the parochial, the domestic, the interpersonal be as credited, as considered, in the way in which we acknowledge our thinking?

Although it can feel like producing a scholarly edition of our own diary entries, this is an attempt at a reflective practice in which we try to teach ourselves new citation methods. Considering citation as methodological, and asking what would happen if we thought about it in parallel with other aspects of the processes of researching? This space has allowed us to look again at how we and who we cite – we have encouraged and challenged each other to try and not only reach out of our traditional references, but also to consider placing them on the same shelf as silly objects (Halberstam, 2011). By paying attention to citational content but also citational form we are interested in how these two often prescribed and overlooked aspects of the research cycle can be more present in our thinking and writing.

### **Rules relax**

Constrained writing freed us. A Hundred is not a diary, or diaristic voice. Nor is it a letter, which arrives, lagged, in dialogue. It resists being pinned down, but does so by placing a rule on the writer (the word count) which, curiously, would in any other circumstance be seen as petty, bureaucratic, heavy handed, unnecessary. The obsession with one aspect of writing, often ignored

in 'creative' contexts, allows for slack elsewhere. 100 words; no space for qualifications. Shy boldnesses emerged.

Amid anxiety and frantic inertia – bloated time for some, restricted time for those same some – the hundreds group and method was an antidote. 100 words a fortnight could be the most work done in that time, was often the best even if not. It is crafty sociology; writing on the ordinary in stealthily small chunks was beneficial to slumps of all kinds. Like putting on shoes being the best way to go out for a run, one hundred words produced following a confrontation at a supermarket queue helped to hook us back into other playful, productive work/lives.

## **Conclusion**

On the back of Berlant and Stewart's book Lesley Stern describes sensing "what it might be like to be unlike the writers". This tingle of incongruency reflects an insight we suggest *The Hundreds* and its live methodological complexion grants us [especially] in lockdown. In our ongoing project, we find that its format is an appropriate response to the destabilisation of academic time that has been a feature of our lives. Adding further destabilisation – of academic practices – to an already unstable situation not only allows us to move collaboratively, but also to reflect more fully on the relationship between methods, time, and emotion.

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