02 2019

Unshrinking the World

An interview with Avery Gordon on her recent book The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins

Avery F. Gordon / Krystian Woznicki

Avery F. Gordon's *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins* (2018) is an impressively kaleidoscopic and genre bending book based on Gordon's more than two decades of research into utopian traditions that have been systematically excluded from the Western canon. Organized in the form of an archive of actual and fictional experiences of living and working together differently, Gordon's book makes a vast array of "subjugated knowledge" (Foucault) visible and available for appropriation. "The Hawthorn Archive" unearths neglected utopian traditions that are less about some distant future place that would have to be built according to people's ideals and more about living and working differently in the here and now of the communal. Here, those who were struggling for the Commons (and against enclosures) in 17th-century England are a major reference point for a variety of other movements, including those who struggled for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery in the Americas and those who struggled for decolonization in the Global South.

KW: Your archive and book project is about collecting the voices of people who are meant to be systematically shut up. It thereby enables them to speak up in an unheard-of choir of dissenters. "The Hawthorn Archive" thus suggests that archiving and sharing overlooked and subjugated knowledge about communal practices is becoming key to making visible undeclared movements as well as key to engendering a collective political consciousness across communal boundaries. How did you come up with this project?

Avery F. Gordon: Let me start with the point you make about the many "undeclared" alternative practices of living and working that are overlooked.

The impetus for the book, which I began thinking about some time ago, was two-fold. One impetus was a desire to pick up where my book "Ghostly Matters" ended, with those "historical alternatives" that "haunt a given society," as Herbert Marcuse wrote; to find the place where, as Patricia Williams put it, our "longings" are "exiled." In this book, I call that place, after Ernst Bloch, the utopian margins.

The other impetus was to challenge the twinned triumphalism of the Right's "End of History" claim and the Left's claim that the political universe had closed shut after the failures of 1968. Both positions seemed completely out of touch with the remarkable wave of anti-capitalist resistance by diverse peoples across the globe, which remained invisible to many until first the Zapatistas in 1994 and then more widely the Seattle WTO protests (1999) woke them up. The Right's end of history claim was also a "utopian" one which went by the name "globalization" – the brave new fourth industrial revolution with its global assembly line, free

trade, and boundless privatization – while dismissing any alternative notions of worldliness as TINA (There is no alternative), as Margaret Thatcher famously put it. The left kept to its Marxist-inspired tradition of treating much of this opposition with the rejectionist epithet: "That's not realistic, that's utopian!" Marcuse called it "the merely utopian," which is often used as a bludgeon to manage proposals and people and actions that have gone too far out of bounds, so to speak. Both prompts suggested the need for a more capacious language suitable for what seemed to me a significant historical moment of political-economic retrenchment and resistance to it.

There were good reasons to distrust and even dismiss the term utopian, although in my opinion, the main problem was not idealism and futurism, but rather the term's deeply racialized historiography and narrow set of literary, aesthetic, philosophical, historical, and sociological references. Not too put to fine a point on it, the extant meaning of the term treated the genocidal settler colonialism that founded the so-called New World as a successful utopian enterprise while absenting entirely what Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker call the "many-headed hydra" of the seventeenth-century "revolutionary Atlantic," those slaves, maids, prisoners, pirates, sailors, heretics, indigenous peoples, commoners, etc. who challenged the making of the modern world capitalist system. Why hold onto a term in which its best practitioners are excluded?

There was a another kind of utopianism entailed by slaves running away, marronage, piracy, heresy, vagabondage, soldier desertion, and other illegible or discredited forms of escape, resistance, opposition and alternative ways of life that continued, of course, to challenge the modern racial capitalist system over time. This other utopianism lends to the term utopian a very different meaning, one

rooted much more in the past and the present, and a very different notion of politics, one rooted in ongoing social struggles, in various forms of non-participation, and in an autonomous politics hostile or indifferent to seizing state power.

It is always easier to see one's historical moment after the fact than in the midst of it, so I hesitate here. But I think that we are still in that cycle of worldwide resistance and opposition that emerged in the 1990s. The triumphalism is gone, of course, and the Left, if it's possible to even speak of such a thing, which I now doubt, is less dismissive of utopian "hopes," even as the term hope is another somewhat patronizing reduction. Capitalism now lurches from crisis to crisis more frequently and is incapable of resolving them without ever increasing financial and military assistance from the state, even as its anti-state ideology sounds louder and louder. The ongoing redistribution of resources from social property to private property in this context of enhanced militarism and securitization has led to more widespread social abandonment and more entrenched inequalities within and between countries. The major capitalist powers in the West seem either not to understand or to be in denial about the decline of western hegemony and the quiet but definitive shifting of the world system east.

The capitalist democratic state, what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls the "anti state state," or most people know by the name of the neoliberal state, is also weakened, internally conflicted to the point of incapacity, nowhere more evident than in Trump's belligerent shutdown of the US government or the UK's Brexit debacle. The legitimation crisis that besets the viability of a capitalist democratic state is real and the authoritarian alternative quite further advanced than the notion of a populist surge implies.

Yet or also, there is widespread, daily, active open political opposition to all this at the scale at which people can contest it: protecting this group of migrants from arrest, confinement and deportation; organizing this strike among teachers in this city; defending this territory from oil drilling; filing law suits against a police department and so on; gathering in public to swear, shout, shake fists, confront the inevitably helmeted riot police. There is also widespread, daily, active, infrapolitical and even secret political opposition, which needs and wants to remain hidden. And there are also so many people, more and more in the western wealthy countries, looking for ways to think and live on different – better terms – and doing it in small ways, whether in local collectives, or in extended family units, with illegal housing and electricity, alternative currencies, in cities and on old tribal lands.

What will happen we don't know, of course. But more and more as people cannot participate in the existing economic and governing systems, they must find another way. Many people in the global south, poor people of color in the global north, and indigenous peoples everywhere are the most experienced at this. Solidarity, assistance, fellowship will be needed. I am not invested in the term utopian – whether it's used or not matters not a great deal. I care about what I call in the book being in-difference. Being in-difference is a political consciousness and a sensuous knowledge, a standpoint and a mindset for living on better terms than we're offered, for living as if you had the necessity and the freedom to do so, for living in the acknowledgement that, despite the overwhelming power of all the systems of domination which are trying to kill us, they never quite become us. They are, as Cedric J. Robinson used to say, only one condition of our existence or being.

I think the key challenge politically is to promote and develop that being in-difference, to learn to stop appealing to the system itself

for redress, to stop believing the forces that are killing you can/will save you. This doesn't mean that we don't engage politically in struggle. It does mean preparing for being ready and available, possibly at a moment's notice, to live autonomously from the system one wants to abolish. The goal is not greater participation or assimilation into the given terms of order. The goal is to overturn that order or displace it or live otherwise than within it. The balance between withdrawal/separation and engagement in social struggle is what has to be determined and there are, unfortunately, no clear rules for this.

KW: In "The Hawthorn Archive", your take on the utopian margins focuses largely on the conditions of dispossession and on the ways out of this predicament. One of the recurring mechanisms that your book tackles is 'dispossession by enclosure'. This allows you to make a connection between different struggles, such as struggles in the England of the 17th century and in post-Katrina New Orleans, which in turn links different phases of globalization (or capitalism, if you will) and, moreover, links two different geo-cultural spheres of conflict.

Your work establishes links and emerges from within a web of unheard-of connections that widen the spectrum of our thinking when it comes to tackling key political questions. When talking about these links, we are close to what you call "abolitionist feminism." You define this approach in your book as a "way of seeing, thinking, and acting that above all makes connections." What I find most compelling about this methodology as you deploy it, is that it contributes to undoing the shrinkages of the world (that are always also shrinkages of the We, meaning shrinkages of the social world) and simultaneously contributes to the possibility of creating connections. If the abolitionist approach

emerges from within the history of enslavement, if it – at its core – demands the abolition of the very structures that create the possibilities and conditions of enslavement, and if it is in the eyes of many an approach directed towards a distant future which seems as far away as the potential scenario of, for instance, a post-capitalist world, then you remind us repeatedly in your book that it is precisely in this perhaps most severe situation of dispossession (enslavement in all its forms and variations) that the only way out is to create an abolitionist stance in the here and now. Does this enable us to expand the discourse of the Commons as a discourse on utopia in the here and now? What role does solidarity play? What kind of support structures are needed?

AFG: Abolition feminism, whose best-known theoretical practitioner is Angela Y. Davis, is a part of the Black radical internationalist tradition. Although it is often associated with the movement to abolish police power and the carceral state, it names a set of positions and standpoints which understand that in order to abolish the prison system as we know it today, it is necessary to eliminate the political, social and economic conditions that produce it, to radically transform our present social order, which cannot be grasped in national or nationalist terms. As she writes, "Prison abolition is a way of talking about the pitfalls of the particular version of democracy represented by U.S. capitalism." What's distinctive about abolition feminism is this deeper vision and the analytic, political and human connections it makes.

Perhaps the most succinct articulation of this connectedness as it comes out of the Black radical tradition is the idea of the indivisibility of justice, as expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963 in the letter he wrote from jail in Birmingham, Alabama. He famously wrote: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,

tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." The notion of the indivisibility of justice – and remember very soon King himself will come to identify militarism and capitalism as what must be fought to achieve racial justice – suggests at least two dimensions of what it might mean to talk about the commons or the common.

One dimension follows directly from the idea of the indivisibility of justice, from a situation in which we are each and every one directly or indirectly impacted by each and every injustice or threat to justice. This network of mutuality or commons is another way of describing solidarity or fellowship, and its existence gives us what King called standing, as well as a certain obligation, to know and to act in concert with others and on behalf of each other's needs. This is a beautiful ideal of our connection, of what we have in common – an escapable network of mutuality, a single garment of destiny. Sometimes these connections are strong and powerful and sometimes they are weak and fractured, but they are, in effect, abolition's political commons. At the Hawthorn Archive, friendship and fellowship are highly valued, and in the documents published in the book there is quite a lot of discussion about the nature of the common cause friendship and fellowship enable (and also did not).

The second dimension refers more directly to regimes of property, ownership, and governance. Here, all the various references in the book that you mentioned constitute a genealogy of a certain kind of communism, with a small c. This genealogy begins in the efforts to prevent racial capitalism from being established (for it emerges as a counterreaction to social struggles too) and continues on into the present bringing together a variety of diverse visions and practices of living without greed-based economies in which economic, social, political and cultural power and resources are

privately hoarded and managed hierarchically. In 1649 the Diggers linked a critique of private property, consumerism and money worship to self-organized democratic governance without war, without policing, and without the tyrannical state. This is an old struggle that we keep reinventing anew. In 2019, these connections are also being made.

Social-spatial enclosures have been used to establish control over territories and people for a very long time and continue to do so, a process that typically involves the reorganization of property relations and the destruction of collectively held land, although it can also involve the taking of private property. Enclosures are maintained by physical boundaries – fences and walls and borders – by armed soldiers and police forces and by social, political, and economic traps, what the geographer Clyde Woods called "trap economics." Enclosure is also applied to thought and culture and to make an almost unbelievable world sensible, desirable, and justifiable. There are many spatial forms of enclosure, including colonization, slavery, reservations, prisons, ghettos, company towns, gated communities, just as there are many mechanisms by which wealth and human capacity are extracted for private gain. What the example of New Orleans shows and what the Diggers several hundred years earlier also understood is that enclosure is not just about land or water or even labour in a simple sense, but about the broader array of resources and capacities being taken, contained, fenced in, and transformed into uses counter to humane purposes. It may start with land, but it doesn't end there, nor is enclosure restricted to property in a narrowly defined sense.

We have to build ourselves – it's not going to be given to us -– the infrastructure for life without or despite capitalism, a life in which we are not enclosed by values and modes of being together based on money and exchange values, status hierarchies, violence and

force, alienation, racialization, and discipline to externally imposed standards. That job is enormous, complex, difficult and fraught with many seemingly overwhelming obstacles and challenges. But it must start with each individual, in common with others, learning to become "unavailable for servitude, back stiff with conviction," to use the African American writer Toni Cade Bambara's words. This is the heart of the abolitionist imaginary, the work of developing that in-difference – the ability to be in-different to the system's own benefits and its own technologies of improvement – so that the struggle to transform the world takes place immanently today now through the means that embody and instantiate the values, practices, and institutional formats we desire.

KW: If the utopian is always to some extent already lived in the everyday of the communal, and if this experience occurs in the shadows of dominant powers that persist in pushing world shrinkage and that rule out alternatives, then how does it make its presence felt?

AFG: In "The Intimacies of Four Continents" (2015) Lisa Lowe investigates the connections between the emergence of European liberalism, settler colonialism in the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade and the East Indies and China trades in the late 18th and 19th century. She begins with an image, a photograph of a secret memorandum from the British Colonial office sent in 1803 to the Chairman of the Court of Directors of the East India Company. It was written just after the Haitian Revolution by colonial administrator John Sullivan and laid the groundwork for the introduction of Chinese indentured workers into the British West Indian island of Trinidad. The memorandum reads:

"The events which have recently happened at St. Domingo necessarily awakes all those apprehensions which the establishment of a Negro government in that land gave rise to some years ago and render it indispensable that every practicable measure of precaution should be adopted to guard the British possessions in the West Indies as well against the the danger of a spirit of insurrection being excited amongst the Negroes in our colonies... no measure would so effectively provide a security against this danger as that of introducing a free race of cultivators into our islands who from habits and feelings could be kept distinct from the Negroes and who from interest would be attached to the European proprietors. The Chinese people unite the qualities which constitute this double recommendation."

This is an important document in the official archive of the intimacies or relations among Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, a reminder of what globalization means. It is also specifically one of several documents that show the extent to which indenture – another system of forced labor and captivity – was part of the liberal response to the end of the slave trade. Lowe's brilliant book is about the intimacies of power, you could say, and the way they divide not only to make money but to prevent or foreclose a different kind of intimacy or solidarity among the colonized.

Her interest is to "engage slavery, genocide, indenture, and liberalism as a conjunction ... as an acknowledged loss in the present." She quotes the African American 17th century historian Stephanie Smallwood from her seminal book "Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora" (2008): "I do not seek to create out of the remains of ledgers and ships' logs, walls and chains the way it really was for the slave waiting to be sold. I try to interpret from the slave trader's disinterest in the slave's pain those social conditions within which there was no

possible political resolution to that pain. I try to imagine what could have been."

There are different ways of imagining what could have been and acknowledging these losses in the present. We need all these ways. Although these losses are always in my mind and in my heart, in this book, I'm less focused on the slave trader's disinterest in the pain of the people he has captured, than in imaging the specter of insurrection and its various excitements, the successes and also the mistakes the English made in thinking that Chinese vagrants would do this work for them. Lowe wants to work in the conditional past – what could have been – to "reckon with the violence of affirmation and forgetting, in order to recognize the reproduction of this violence today."

"The Hawthorn Archive" operates in a slightly different temporality: what was almost or not quite yet or was present and at the same time yet to come. It tries to represent the traces of the remains of the past or the future yet to come as if in the present. This is the future conditional or the imperfect past tense, a combination of the past tense and a continuous or repeating aspect, something that is unfinished. The Chimurenga Library and Pan African Space Station put the question thus: "Can a past that the present has not yet caught up with be summoned to haunt the present as an alternative?" What would happen if we understood that what haunts from the past are precisely all those aspirations and actions – small and large, individual and collective – that oppose racial capitalism and empire and live actively other than on those terms of order. These living haunts are part of the past the present has not yet caught up with. This is what I mean by the idea of the utopian margins – an alternate civilization crossing time and place, accumulating a kind of cultural or political surplus, as Bloch called it.

KW: But how can we represent it?

AFG: That's difficult. I tried to follow Monique Wittig's instruction in "Les Guérillères" (1969): "There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent." And this is one reason for the book's form, which I feel it is important to mention because the book doesn't read quite in the way we've been talking/writing to each other, even though some of what's here in this interview is written in the book. Rather, the book invites the reader into the world of the Hawthorn Archive, situated as it is in that liminal place we can call the utopian margins, where then now and soon we are, as James Baldwin used to say, better than what they think we are.

KW: Speaking of the book's form, I find important to note that at first glance the book can be read as a monograph: the new book by sociologist Avery F. Gordon, published by a conventional academic publishing house. At second glance, it is something else entirely: an archive, or better, an unconventional archive. At a third glance, its experimental structure – the form of an archive – makes it an unusual monograph. For me it is most interesting to understand or misunderstand it in that way, because this reading brings the question of authorship to the fore. More precisely, it prompts us to think how traditional authorship – especially in the realm of academic research – can or cannot come to terms with the subject of subjugated knowledge.

In my personal experience, when I started reading the book, I was almost immediately reminded of films by Lucrecia Martel (such as "Zama" (2017)) or by Apichatpong Weerasethakul (especially "Mysterious Object at Noon" (2000)) who also engage with (post-)

colonial archives by posing the question of authorship. Who is able to be an author? Who can be considered an author? And how can we expand the limited notions of authorship even when using its traditional formats that tend to support exclusive notions of authorship? At the same time, I felt compelled to read the book like a conventional monograph: from first to last page (rather than browsing through it), as if this was perhaps not the only but the best way to actively join the deconstruction of authorship: following the author and un-following the author at the same time, and thereby entering a third, spectral space.

AFG: A third or fourth spectral space – the utopian margins! Welcome. And thank you for reading the book with such care, concentration and support for its political project.

The interview was conducted as part of Berliner Gazette's current project MORE WORLD: https://projekte.berlinergazette.de/more-world/.