

# KEEPING GOOD TIME

---

Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People

*Avery F. Gordon*

First published 2004 by Paradigm Publishers

Published 2016 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

Copyright © 2004 by Avery F. Gordon

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

Designed and Typeset by Straight Creek Bookmakers.

ISBN 13: 978-1-59451-014-4 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-59451-015-1 (pbk)

# PREFACE

---

*Keeping Good Time* is a collection of writings I have done over the past twelve years.<sup>1</sup> When the first of these pieces was written, I had moved from the familiar East Coast to the strange and unknown West Coast to start a new job as an assistant professor of sociology at a public research university. Then, as now, I regarded myself first and foremost as a critical intellectual. Then, as now, culture was a name and also a contested terrain within which I tried to understand how to “cement pain to purpose, experience to expectation, consciousness to collective action.”<sup>2</sup> When the first of the pieces was written, the government of the United States was at war with Iraq. Then, as now, I publicly opposed state warfare and competitive economies, while paid by the state to teach its young people how to be part of an “educated workforce that keeps the California economy competitive.”<sup>3</sup>

Thankfully, I have changed and grown over the years. I have gained greater knowledge and experience, as well as extremely precious collaborators and friends who have helped me to become a much better version of myself. Hopefully, I have gained some wisdom too. But these themes in my self-definition and in my work have remained constant, as have the public struggles and conflicts within myself they inevitably generate. I have worked on and also worked through questions about the politics of knowledge and culture and the role of education during wartime more than anywhere else through the medium of the form predominantly represented here: essays written for specific occasions and to be read aloud.<sup>4</sup> In fact, I decided to put this book together when I realized that I didn’t just sometimes write occasional pieces separate from my “main line of research and publication,” as the official university language has it, but when I realized that often I write for the occasion.

I used to think the reason I wrote this way was because I didn’t have the time to do otherwise given undergraduate teaching and graduate advising and administrative meetings and professional service and a weekly radio program and political activities and given having what’s known in our business as a life. Since many people I know are in exactly the same or far more demanding situations, this seemed a reasonable and plausible explanation. Certainly, time for writing books is an issue for those academics, far greater in number than are credited, who routinely juggle multiple responsibilities without the infrastructural support every other profession takes for granted. And there’s no doubt that the seemingly intractable problem of time management and writing is profoundly gendered, impacting women severely and symptomatically in ways it has proved extremely difficult to solve humanely. There is also a highly ritualized professorial discourse about busy-ness and time, which often defensively acts out the rather low regard in which academic labor and its products, especially those not fitting the normal

science model, are held. So, to be sure, time has had something to do with my use of this form. But I think that the reason I've worked in it has not been entirely because there wasn't enough time for something else or something better. After all, I have spent a considerable amount of time on this type of writing. Rather, I think that my habit of rising to the occasion, of writing to and for the occasion, has been how I try to keep good time. As the title essay suggests, keeping good time is about knowing how to tell the time, even if you don't own a real watch, and simultaneously about knowing whose time it is. In a phrase, keeping good time is about taking sides.

More than anything else, what has motivated the work presented here and what threads its shared thematics together has been my effort to accomplish the tasks Chuck Morse sets out for the politically engaged radical critic. He writes, "It is the task of the radical critic to illuminate what is repressed and excluded by the basic mechanisms of a given social order. It is the task of the *politically engaged* radical critic to *side* with the excluded and repressed: to develop insights gained in confrontation with injustice, to nourish cultures of resistance, and to help define the means with which society can be rendered adequate to the full breadth of human potentialities."<sup>5</sup> I'd like to be clear that *Keeping Good Time* is not a guide or a model for how to be a politically engaged intellectual. It couldn't possibly be such a thing because these are ambitious and humbling tasks one devotes a lifetime to practicing cooperatively with others. Indeed, in my experience, to be a politically engaged intellectual in Morse's precise and expansive terms, requires an everyday life practice which instantiates the values attached to the cooperative commitment to take such a side or a stand(point).

Morse distinguishes between two distinct and valuable types of critical intellectual, the former more numerous than the latter in universities. I've chosen to be the politically engaged type out of temperament, because of formative experiences, and for intellectual and ethical reasons which a good deal of my work tries to explain. I do not mean to suggest that these essays should be treated as merely self-justification; such a judgment upon them would be distressing. I grew up needing to and wanting to **CHANGE THE WORLD**, as young people like to say, often loudly and with intense serious urgency. While I work in a profession in which this desire is treated *at best* as a naiveté you're supposed to outgrow, I have never been ashamed of the need, and I have never abandoned it. Nonetheless, these essays, in their own small way and as part of a larger body of writings and activities by myself and others, do try to authorize the warrant for *siding with the excluded*, for *nourishing cultures of resistance*, and for finding in *confrontations with injustice* precisely the diagnostic *insights* and the imaginative *means to render society adequate to human life*.

The opening and closing essays of the book—"Keeping Good Time" and "Exercised"—set the tone for presenting the warrant for politically engaged scholarship in an internationalist context. Each comments on an allegory told by the great writer Eduardo Galeano, and each locates the source of crucial social knowledge about poverty and culture and about what's called globalization in the allegory's

ordinary protagonists. In miniature, the bookends trace the outlines of what's involved in locating the place where the diagnostic and the imaginative are married in subjugated knowledge. They trace what's involved in counting or treating this knowledge, not as limited or specialized or particularistic or in need of managerial oversight by superiors, but as valuable and generalizable critical thought. And, they signal the importance to me of storytelling, the arts of representation, and the nature of the power by which writing can, to use Ralph Ellison's words, "command [our] mind and emotions."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, I turn again and again to writing to understand its power to animate the social life of discounted and disregarded people, to show in a complex way and not just tell how things are, and to transport or move both the writer and the reader. For better or worse, I have clung to the pedagogical belief in the power of the word.

In between the bookends, the essays are grouped into four thematic sections. The first, *Education During Wartime*, is about war, and the second, *Face Up To What's Killing You*, is about imprisonment. It is sobering to remember that during my whole life the government of the United States has been at war with somebody not European—with Iraq since I started my full-time academic career. In both these sections, the essays take an antiracist feminist approach to connect wars abroad with wars at home. They also try to expose the manufacture of a fear that creates what C. Wright Mills called "scared employees," that treats dissent as treason, and that underwrites the building of a law-and-order society where national security ties militarism abroad to policing and imprisonment at home. Providing education during wartime turns out to be a major part of my job, and these pieces are occupied with figuring out exactly what kind of education is required under the circumstances. (Of course, nobody actually describes the job to you like that, although employees of the University of California are still required by law to sign a Cold War anticommunist loyalty oath to the State of California.) Providing a good education during wartime, I've found, requires abandoning the moderation that is presumed to be most becoming, as my southern mother would have said, in a professor. Keeping good time sometimes requires raising your voice. You can definitely hear angry shouting in some of these pieces.

The remaining two sections, *Making a Difference* and *No Alibis*, gather essays that broadly address questions about the politics of knowledge, art, and culture. Christopher Newfield once told me that the purpose of the humanities is "to sustain unjustifiable optimism."<sup>7</sup> He made this statement in the context of responding to demands that nonscientific and nontechnological fields justify their research function and thus their right to public and private funding beyond the minimum necessary to teach poorly trained high-school graduates basic reading and writing skills. In looking to locate his discipline's utility, he found it in the humanities' ability to produce and disseminate knowledge about a practical human spirit that defies the rationalistic conceits which establish the officially sanctioned good evidence of what's obviously possible and what's not. I think this is an important and appropriate mandate for the humanities, but it is not and should not be exclusive to them.

The relationship between what I would just call humanism and disciplinary knowledge, particularly sociology, Marxism, commercial art worlds, and corporate culture, is explored in the pieces in these sections. The humanism traced out and presumed in the essays and in the work of the individuals featured in them stands in opposition to what Lisa Lowe has named the “international division of humanity” upon which traditional Western humanism rests. What this humanism, derived from “other humanities,” stands for is the necessity of privileging—intellectually, epistemologically, politically, personally—the human stakes and the human fates of critique and of prescription.<sup>8</sup> It’s easy, normal, to be distracted by other stakes and claims—to professionally derived standards, to bureaucratic commonplaces, to authority, to status, and of course also to greed and individual aggrandizement. But, there’s no other choice but to try to keep good time right where you are, mindful of the distractions and their alibis, mindful of the harms, degradations, and aggravations you’re working to understand and to replace.

Keeping good time right where you are may seem a banal truism, a cliché for the righteous. Perhaps so. It is also a core feature of the abolitionist imaginary that has guided the worldwide movements to abolish slavery and captivity, to abolish imprisonment and the prison industrial complex, to abolish colonialism, to abolish foreign debt bondage, and to abolish the world order known as globalization. I’ve been writing a book about utopian consciousness as a model of political engagement (called *In the Shadow of the Bottom Line*), a theme which the later essays collected here address more and more directly. It is to these movements and to the abolitionist imaginary that I have looked for the core definition of utopianism I offer: the practice of being and/or becoming unavailable for servitude. There are many reasons why I take abolitionism, entirely absent in the history and theory of Western utopianism, as the model for a viable utopianism I believe we need. But one of the most important is that what distinguishes the abolitionist imaginary in practice is the refusal to wait. Slaves or prisoners or captives have no choice but to free themselves while still enslaved or imprisoned, and it is this foundational condition and courage that defines the abolitionist imaginary, its method, and its exercise. Abolitionists don’t wait for the right leaders or conditions to come along before they act; abolitionists don’t wait for their freedom to be given to them before they claim it and exercise it; abolitionists don’t wait for the future before they start to live the lives they’re hoping will replace the ones they’ve got. As Danny Glover eloquently expressed it at the 2003 World Social Forum: “June Jordan said that we are the ones we are waiting for. There’s no one else but us. Myself, you, none of us are absolved of this responsibility. We are not gods, as June Jordan said, but we are many. Since we are not gods, we can be great and we can be a great many.”<sup>9</sup>

*Keeping Good Time* is a modest book and its limitations will be plain. I hope, however, that it will encourage greatness in its readers, by inspiring that patient urgency distinctive to the abolitionist refusal to wait.

# NOTES

## Preface

1. *Keeping Good Time* is a selection, not a collection, of my writings between 1990 and 2003. I excluded major articles easily available in journals or anthologies and earlier versions of chapters later revised and published in books. I also have excluded the rather substantial number of written lectures I prepare for teaching undergraduate and graduate students. The classroom lectures, like most of the pieces included here, were written to be spoken aloud, but seemed utterly dead and lifeless outside the interactive context of a ten-week course, the occasion for which they were written. I selected items that fit most closely to the genre of the occasional essay. And within that genre, I looked for items that fit within the book's broader thematic patterns and for thoughts expressed or points made that seemed, at least to me, to warrant publication by virtue of their originality, utility, or significance. Of the six previously published items that I included, each had to meet the publication criteria for inclusion here and either meet the genre criteria and/or have been published in art exhibition catalogs or books very difficult to access.

Items previously published have been copyedited only; any changes are insubstantial. All other items have been edited to remove obvious mistakes of fact or attribution, to smooth glitches that would be annoying to read, and to remove repetition where it seemed tedious. In a couple of cases, major cuts were made where the material presented has subsequently been published in a book. Footnotes were added to give credit where it is due and where they couldn't have been heard while speaking. Any errors in analytic judgment and all that I wish I hadn't quite said have had to stay. Likewise, things I would have liked to have said instead or would say now or am tempted to elaborate on have had to keep quiet. I must admit that what I was most tempted to add was a description of the actual scenes and sounds, both public and behind-the-scenes, in which these pieces were delivered or produced, since that is a crucial part of the picture of speaking up and out. To have turned *Keeping Good Time* ethnographic might have improved it, but it certainly would have made it a different book altogether.

2. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983), p. 451.

3. University of California Mission Statement: <http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/aboutuc/mission.html>.

4. Not all the pieces included in the collection were written in this form. A few were prepared for publication or written as speeches.

5. Chuck Morse, "Capitalism, Marxism and the Black Radical Tradition: An Interview with Cedric Robinson," *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1999).

6. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, (New York: Vintage, 1964), p. xii. In the "Introduction," Ellison describes his transition from identifying as a musician to identifying as a writer. The whole passage reads: "For in the beginning writing was far from a serious matter. . . . Rather it was a reflex of reading, an extension of a source of pleasure, escape and instruction. In fact, I had become curious