
Haunting and thinking from the Utopian margins: Conversation with Avery Gordon

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Abstract

Avery Gordon's work exceeds the limits of disciplinary boundaries and so does her practice. She uses the term 'itinerant' to describe her strategies of inhabiting multidisciplinary spaces and of critiquing the worlds, peripheries and fractures produced by racial capitalism. Gordon moves as an intellectual itinerant, creating multidirectional and interdisciplinary dialogues as a sociology scholar at the University of California, Santa Barbara, while also collaborating with artist. Since 1997, Gordon speaks as a public intellectual on her KCSB FM radio programme, 'No Alibis', co-hosted with Elizabeth Robinson. She is also a visiting professor at the Birkbeck School of Law, University of London. In the tradition of critical thinkers, Gordon's work starts from a sense of urgency, exposed and developed in different ways in her major works, including her path-breaking book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press), her teaching and writing on prisons and the carceral system, and her most recent book *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins* (Fordham University Press).

In January 2018, we invited Gordon to Santiago, Chile's Museum of Memory and Human Rights, to deliver the talk, 'Pensar desde los Márgenes Utópicos/Haunted Futures: The Utopian Margins'. Gordon also took a guided visit through Chile's Estadio Nacional Memoria Nacional/National Stadium National Memory site. Here is an extended conversation on the topics that frame her work, like ghosts, haunting and utopia, and on questions that emerge from the memory studies field and that are of concern to our special issue.

Keywords

haunting, justice, utopia

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In *Ghostly Matters*, first published in 1998, you developed a reflection on methods in which the researcher's very politics of seeing and experiences of encountering become the focus of inquiry. In the second chapter, you use your encounter with a photograph, or rather, with the absent subject of a photograph, to think about the research process 'under the sign of post-modernity' (p. 32), about how we are haunted by what we are researching. By noticing that Sabina Spielrein was not in the picture, although she was present the day the picture was taken, you frame a reflection on absence and presence, which hovers in between the one who is haunted (the I, the witness) and the woman ghost, in this case. As in your book, written in the late 1990s, in social science parlance, ghosts, memories and excavations were part of a turn to the past.

Authors like Foucault have discussed archaeology and genealogy as two practices that resemble excavating, practices that would assume intention, purpose. Benjamin also writes of digging, which also resembles intention and searching. Yet, perhaps we find a difference in the mode of encounter that you describe in *Ghostly Matters*, where one is somehow 'assaulted' – being led, drawn or seized. What is the epistemological point that you were trying to make?

'The sign of postmodernity', which is troubled and abandoned in the course of the book, dates it and also refers to a set of epistemological challenges and social realities that were part of the intellectual milieu in which the book was written. These challenges included not only representational challenges to the traditional distinctions between fact and fiction that established the disciplinary foundations of the social sciences, but as well, in the language of the time, 'the collapse of Man and his knowledge regimes, images of reality more real than the real itself, empires speaking back, the dissolution of well-worn boundaries between centers and margins, the migration of new peoples into established institutions and countries, the unprecedented mobility and flexibility of capital, and so on' (p. 32). I wanted to know what it might mean to take these challenges seriously at both the level of diagnosis – understanding – and at the level of representation – writing. In other words, what mode of knowledge production could understand modern forms of dispossession, exploitation and repression and what kind of writing practice could convey, evoke, conjure those understandings in a way that took those challenges seriously? The epistemological point was first of all to center the 'encounter' as an encounter. And each chapter stages this encounter at various levels – I am not the only searcher in the book. My intention was not to 'assault' the reader but to bring them into the social scene of haunting where force and meaning meet and to ask them to linger there without the usual academic distancing supports, in the hope that some more sensual knowledge, or what Benjamin called a profane illumination, might emerge. The epistemological point was always tied to the social and political project of the work: to find a language for describing racial capitalism, slavery and militaristic state violence in order to end these once and for all. And the epistemological point emerged from the nature of haunting itself, which, among other lessons, teaches us that the ghost, who however singular is never alone in these circumstances, has an agency, intentions towards us, that must be identified and reckoned with. Remember, in effect, the ghost is haunted, too. In this sense, it was less Foucault's model of genealogical analysis than his notion of subjugated knowledge that was perhaps the more relevant practice of the two you mention. *Ghostly Matters* rightly credits Luisa Valenzuela and Toni Morrison (1987) for the major methods lessons.

Ghostly Matters was published in the middle of the 'trauma turn' in the memory field. In that context, your language of haunting offered an alternative to trauma in order to reckon with violence and suffering. Rather than focusing on individual experiences of dissociation that could also be medicalized through post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), you draw attention to the idea of haunting, thinking through repressed forms of violence that bring 'something to be done' in the present. What is the relationship between haunting and the something to be done? How do you conceptualize the political and ethical effects, traces and demands of the ghost in the present?

Ghostly Matters has an uneasy relationship to psychoanalysis and in fact begins with a story of its limits, a story of my failure to find the answers in it to the questions I had, prompted by Sabina Spielrein's absence in a photograph of a meeting in which she ought to have been present. Analytically, the book leaves psychoanalysis behind, although it reappears in the chapter on the *desaparecidos* in Argentina, where it also fails dramatically and dangerously to help *He Who Searches*, Luisa Valenzuela's protagonist in her novella *Como en la Guerra*. I wasn't engaged in what you call the trauma turn when I was writing the book. I went back and checked: there is not even an index entry for the word trauma in it. The reason is because I was intellectually engaged primarily in African American Studies, Marxism and cultural studies (in the Stuart Hall tradition), trying to understand, as I said earlier, racial capitalism and state violence, and the paradigmatic referent in the early work of trauma studies was the Holocaust. What broadly goes under the rubric of critical trauma studies or critical trauma theory today is a much broader and more comparative field than the one just starting when I was researching and writing the book, and it is one that both of you know better than I do.

Haunting, in the specific way I used the term, which is not the only way it is or should be used, is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes directly, sometimes not. Haunting raises spectres and it alters the experience of being in linear time, the way we separate the past, present and the future. There were two aspects of what I was trying to say about haunting that relate to your question. The first is that the ghost is not, as I see it, the invisible or the unknown or the absent *per se*. Ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer contained or repressed or blocked from view. In other words, haunting is a way we're notified that what's been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, interfering with us and with the systems of repression that produce concealment and blockage. Much of the book was taken up with detailing the experience of this animation or emergence, with the moment when the repression isn't working anymore and the scene shifts. The second aspect is, as you said, that I was using the term haunting to refer to a socio-political-psychological state when something else or something different from before feels like it must be done and prompts a something-to-be-done. I described haunting as that moment – long or short – when things are not in their assigned places, when people meant to be invisible or absent or dead show up without any sign of leaving, when the present seamlessly becoming the future gets jammed up, when cracks in the whole infrastructure of repression are exposed. In this sense, haunting in the way I was using the term produces a something to be done.

Haunting is an emergent state: the ghost arises, carrying the signs and portents of a repression in the past or the present that's no longer working. The ghost demands your attention. The present wavers. Something will happen. What will happen is not given in advance, but something must be done. I think this emergent state is the critical analytic moment: when the repression isn't working anymore the trouble that results creates conditions that demand re-narrativization. What's happening? Why now? What does it mean? When the repression isn't working anymore, the trouble that results creates conditions that also invite action. What do I do? Who will help? How to make things better?

In this sense, haunting, in the way I was using it, is different than trauma or inconsolable mourning or various forms of disassociative repetition. I tried to describe the difference between trauma and haunting in an article, 'Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity' and also in *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins*, in the latter with reference to the work psychologists must do in occupied Palestine where, as they say, there is no 'P'(ost) in PTSD, so I won't repeat all that here. I will say that while it limits the scope to define haunting in this way, the something to be done directs us to the requirements of individual, social and political movement and change – and the question of political consciousness and social change is the driving one for me. One of those requirements is that the ghost and its needs must be treated respectfully, and not ghosted or disappeared again in the act of dealing with the haunting.

From the 1970s onwards, the language of human right violations has been influential in describing various experiences of genocide and state violence, with things like the production of reports (i.e. truth commission reports), an important phenomenon in the process of

coming to terms with violence. In *Ghostly Matters*, in ‘the other door’ chapter, you suggest that haunting consists of something that is missing in these reports, and that ‘haunting is an encounter in which you touch the ghost or the ghostly matter of things: the ambiguities, the complexities of power and personhood, the violence and the hope, the looming and receding actualities, the shadows of ourselves and our society’ (p. 135). What is missing in human rights reports and language?

The human rights report is very important both as a source of information and as a medium of resistance. I couldn’t have written *Ghostly Matters* without the work of Amnesty International and the CONADEP (Argentina’s National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons). The research that human rights groups undertake is invaluable and has only gotten more and more important since *Ghostly Matters* was written. We would know nothing about what happened at the US military prisons in Iraq (and not only at Abu Ghraib) or in Guantanamo, Cuba without them and the dogged committed efforts of the people who write them. I say this because there was and is something missing from them and most official documents that I tried to take into consideration and show in *Ghostly Matters*. But I would like to emphasize that this consideration was made from the vantage point of a friendly supplement to a form that must avoid such considerations in order to be heard and legitimated. It is precisely what Michael Taussig, in *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, called the ‘epistemic murk’ endemic to cultures of terror (p. 36). Taussig’s book, perhaps more than any other, provided me both permission and a literary/analytic model for dealing directly with the ways in which ‘the epistemological, ontological, and otherwise philosophical problem of representation – reality and illusion, certainty and doubt – becomes more than a “merely” philosophical problem of epistemology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction. It becomes a high-powered medium of domination’ (p. 121). In the case of the chapter – ‘the other door’ – about Argentina, I tried to follow the ghostly murky elements the reports cannot in order to develop a different vocabulary for understanding what disappearance is, how we can know something of it and survive and how to prevent it from happening.

You use the term justice in *Ghostly Matters*. We have two sets of questions about justice. First, how do you envision the relationship between haunting and justice? What kind of justice does the concept of haunting and the figure of the ghost bring forward? What is the place of justice in your work?

Second, we are interested in critiques of the concept of justice, particularly with regard to the emergence in the early 1990s of transitional justice and those initiatives that focused on political and legal institutional stability to reinforce emergent democracies, as they were called. After an initial optimism, we started in the 2000s to see a more negative or critical assessment of the outcomes of these projects, as, in the opinion of some, these projects legitimized cultures of impunity and, in the opinion of others, they legitimized the status quo. There is an ongoing debate here (see, for instance, Skaar et al., 2016), and recently scholars have tended to address these questions by exploring the long-term effects and the afterlife of these historical processes (Bakiner, 2015; Ferrara, 2015). What seems to be at stake is a dis-encounter, disattachment and a form of gap, between the outcomes and effects of the justice of institutions, and the ideas of justice, and their promises as discourses of memory at the grassroots level. During your few days in Chile, we had the chance to go to the Estadio Nacional, a memory site to remember the atrocities under the Pinochet regime. We are talking of a blatant, oppressive, violent past that envelops a society, a past that produced fear and self-censorship, silence and the resonances you feel, that you recognize, that it’s still very felt here, and also how a collective comes together to challenge, recognize, reckon with this, by ‘remembering’ in a memory site. How might you think about your theorization in relation to what Chile’s been undergoing?

These are complex questions on subjects – transitional justice and collective memory in Chile – about which I don't feel competent to speak, and thus my answers will disappoint, I'm sure. These are your areas of expertise! The answer to the general question about the relationship between haunting and justice will be unsatisfactory for a different reason, which is that there is no abstract or general relationship. The response to haunting is not given in advance. The word justice acted as a placeholder or shorthand in *Ghostly Matters* for the social, economic, political and cultural changes required to eliminate the conditions that produce the organized or systemic violence in the first place. As a term, it wasn't elaborated or specified so much as lazily evoked, here and there and around the other languages of the movements whose praxis was centered—specifically, the abolition movements and the anti-authoritarianism of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—to name the recalibration in power and accountability those changed conditions would yield. To highlight the demand – ‘against civil authoritarianism’ – made by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in 1987, 4 years after the military dictatorship ended and a civilian government was restored, and to focus on the lives of formerly enslaved people after emancipation, as *Ghostly Matters* did, was to make the obvious point that these formal changes in law and government, these forms of state justice, were, at best, inadequate.

Eve Tuck and C Ree write in ‘The Glossary of Haunting’ that ‘haunting is the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society’s assurances of innocence and reconciliation . . . Haunting aims [not to right wrongs that cannot be undone but] to wrong the wrongs’ (p. 642). It requires a deeper ‘decolonization’ at all levels than what is usually meant by the term justice, which, as they write, ‘Everyone nods their head to justice. Who can disagree with justice?’ (p. 651). I think they are right to say that in the context of US settler colonialism (and in other contexts too), ‘The promise of social justice sometimes rings false, smells consumptive, like another manifest destiny. Like you can get there, but only if you climb over me’ (p. 647).

What's central to my thinking and to my work is the importance of social struggle and the ways in which these struggles unfold and change in the multiple temporalities and civilizational worlds in which we live. I was very moved by the guided visit that Moisés Mendoza gave us at the Stadium. I think what I found most striking was the combination of care for the physical place as a living memorial, which involves keeping alive a remembrance of its use for detention, torture and death, in the midst of many people enjoying it for sports and recreation, and care for the survivors and the families of the survivors, which involves a delicate intimacy in respectfully attending to the singularity of each individual in the context of both state-organized violence and a collective grassroots response. What I experienced on the tour was how beautifully and graciously the volunteers and organizers literally guide visitors to what Lawrence Weschler (1990) called ‘acknowledgement’: the ‘sacramental transformation’ of information into publicly sanctioned truth. The atmosphere at the Stadium was distinct from other memory sites I've visited and also from the Museum of Memory and Human Rights where I gave the lecture, in large measure, in my opinion, because it is not a museum or a memorial only but rather an everyday location, widely used and filled with the sights and sounds of football, swimming, running, boxing and so on, in which the traces of the atrocities of the Pinochet regime are recorded and remembered. An empty set of wooden benches behind the north goal of the football stadium, dozens of photographic portraits of women held prisoner in the pool changing room, noisy young boxers next to *Escotilla no. 8* (Hatchway No. 8), a small sign ‘Silencio por favor, Tomando Testimonios’ (‘Silence please, Taking Testimonies’) on a non-descript door near the bathrooms. Torture and terror create their own world, complete with a cartography of systematic and physically violent subordination in which ‘excess’ is the norm. In this space of death, people cling to life and find ways to create a sociality that however quietly challenges the dehumanization that is endemic to torture, but death and the threat of it dominate brutally. This is inverted at the Stadium so that the death space is not the norm but rather held in place as a reminder of what shatters the life around it.

There are a couple of dimensions, sometimes intersecting and sometimes not, to the problem of the gap you described, which I experienced during my visit to Santiago. One is the sense that despite the extensive legal process in Chile, which mandates both prosecution and memorialization, justice has yet to be

achieved and moreover that justice might not be possible through these means since the problem isn't exactly poor judges or inadequate laws or not enough court cases. Here, there is a gap between means and ends – the justice system cannot yield what is desired – as well as a recognition that what lingers, what remains unresolved, is both older than the specific years of the dictatorship and also younger, current. Although it sounds counterintuitive, both legal processes in general and the memorial museum industry that's emerged over the past 30 odd years, about which Katie has written extensively, are hostile to the long fetch of history. This produces a situation in which the state has a vested interest in maintaining limits on what is to be remembered and held accountable. These limits prohibit remembering the deeper social, economic and political conditions – conquest, colonization, enslavement, racial capitalism – that produce the ideological and material terms that order our modern Western world and that, in their contemporary incarnations, produced the dictatorship in Chile and variations elsewhere (Ines Schaber and I attempted to create an exhibition beyond these limits about Breitenau, outside of Kassel Germany, for DOCUMENTA (13), with the invaluable help of its memorial director, Gunnar Richter (2009), a version of which was published as *The Workhouse: The Breitenau Room*). These limits also discourage the broader analytic reach and solidarities that enable us to understand that the war against Allende's Popular Unity government, aided and abetted by the United States and others, was a war against the possibility of an alternative way of life.

Justice is a living idea that is stitched and unravelled and then is stretched again between moving points. Justice for those who died or survived the military junta's torture cells requires eliminating the militaries that maintain authoritarian governments and justify police power in so-called democratic governments. To mount a struggle against police power requires solidarities that are not yet organized well in Chile, especially between indigenous communities and the urban left, between younger and older generations and between those who pursue human rights in law and those who seek to 'wrong the wrongs' in direct political action. Chile is not unique in this. Western civilization is in chaos and in decline. I realize this sounds hyperbolic, but I believe that the contours of the modern world are changing. Can ordinary people steer the course of those changes? Perhaps not, or not in the way we've been doing it in the twentieth century. But many are trying, as we have throughout history, to create the conditions for a peaceful, equitable and livable existence, and, without this effort, no notions of justice, however sophisticated or expanded, will be adequate.

Underlying *The Hawthorn Archive*, your most recent book, is the concept of utopia, which has had various trajectories during the twentieth century, and after a moment of being discredited, it seems that we are attending to a form of rebirth, in new forms. Why thinking about utopia now? Why do we need to (re)think about utopia?

After I finished *Ghostly Matters*, I started a research project that I thought would result in a normal academic book whose purpose was to redefine what utopian thinking and practice had meant and could mean if, for example, slavery and prison abolition or the Jubilee anti-debt movement were examples of it. The impetus for the book was twofold. One 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 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 and then more widely the Seattle WTO protests woke them up. And both used the utopian as a rejectionist epithet: 'That's not realistic, that's utopian!' The other impetus was a desire to pick up where *Ghostly Matters* ended, with those 'historical alternatives' that 'haunt a given society', as Herbert Marcuse (1969) wrote; to find the place where, as Patricia Williams (1991) put it, our 'longings' are 'exiled'. 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.

I was interested to see if the term utopia could be made to mean something more than the future perfect no-place imagined as a little white nation. When I started the project, the term was still in its 'discredit' phase, as you put it. The discourse of utopia had been roundly criticized for its idealism and futurism, but

not much for its deeply racialized historiography and its narrowly exclusive set of literary, aesthetic, philosophical, historical and sociological references. This became very clear in 2000 when, as the academic field of utopian studies was gaining ground, the New York Public Library and France's *Bibliothèque nationale* organized a large exhibit, online archive and publication program in 2000 entitled *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World*. This project, characteristically, established the genocidal settler colonialism that founded the so-called new world as a successful utopian enterprise by 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 and so on who challenged the making of the modern world capitalist system. I went in search of the utopian thought and practice in this zone of exclusion – what I called the other utopianism – with its distinct onto-epistemological affects and its historical roots in slaves running away, marronage, piracy, heresy, witchcraft, vagrancy, vagabondage, rebellion, soldier desertion and other often illegible, illegitimate or trivialized forms of escape, resistance, opposition and alternative ways of life.

I did find this other utopianism, for sure, but as a living tradition, not as an academic object or subject. When, over time, there was a sea change in the term's fortunes, and a mini academic industry developed around it, all interesting and to the better for the concept, we at the Hawthorn Archive were somewhat far away from all that. New arrivals sometimes brought an enthusiasm for the term that old-timers no longer had, but if they stayed it dissipated out of lack of need for it. In other words, the now in your question is everything. Thinking in utopian terms is important and necessary for social struggle, for remembering what one fights for, for giving it language and form. Once you're already living in what I call in-difference, you don't need that language in quite the same way.

In *The Hawthorn Archive* (2018), the gesture of making visible the invisible that was allowed through the language of haunting becomes radicalized. There is a relationship among the materiality of the book, the archive, and the idea of utopia that you are framing there. How did that happen?

The book, *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins*, consists of a selection of items held by the Hawthorn Archive – letters, internal memos, reports, notes, conversations, images of various sorts, photographs, films and other miscellany. The Hawthorn Archive gathers the utopian histories and practices of those who have long challenged the modern racial capitalist system but whose challenges have been obscured, including by the history of the utopian itself. The Archive houses, although it is not really a library, an incomplete and disorganized intellectual history of a somewhat but not entirely random selection of radicals, fugitives, runaways, deserters, abolitionists, heretics, dreamers and in-differents who at some point stopped doing what they were told they had to do, stopped thinking what they were told they had to think and stopped being available for things they had no design in making or controlling.

There are two answers to your question about form and archive. The first from within the world of the Archive is that the idea of the book came about because I was stepping down as keeper and after some discussion we decided that it would be useful to produce a selection of items for publication. The question of whether the collection was too focused on me turned out to be less contentious than the question of who would read the book. Did the members of the Archive need it? If not for them, then for whom? What implications did a non-Archive audience have for a certain need for secrecy and keeping hidden out of sight? Selection was made with that latter concern in mind. The form of the book is self-evident in this context, although it gives an impression of the Archive's orderliness, which is merely an artefact of editing and thus somewhat misleading.

The answer outside of the world of the Archive, in your world, is that the form of the book reflects four aspects of the project. First, the book is not a novel, although I think the novel form haunts it, albeit in ways that may matter only to me. Second, the book is an assembly of letters, documents, images, file notes and so on because that is the form in which archives exist. On the one hand, compared to a normal academic

book, it is non-linear, without chapters, disorganized, obviously incomplete and not structured by a thesis or argument. On the other hand, compared to an actual archive, it actually does have an argument, an organization and logic to the materials and their sequence, although like most archives it, too, remains incomplete and non-exhaustive. It was important to me to keep sight of the significance of the mode of production, both the mode of production of our work and the capitalist mode of production in which we live.

Third, as I mentioned, the book was written over a long period of time and thus in bits and pieces. Many of the initial parts were written in the context of working in the art world and with artists as the keeper of the Hawthorn Archive. In that world, there is a greater openness to creative composition, particularly at the border between the factual and fictional, and thus when people made requests of me, in my capacity as keeper of the Archive, I responded in that capacity, returning letters, information and items as requested.

Finally, the primary purpose of the project, as I intimated earlier, was not to critique the utopian's exclusionary zone, but rather to show something of what is in the space made invisible by its diagnostic frame. There's always something or someone living and breathing in the place blinded from view. The question is what and who is there. The emphasis on what's living rather than what's spectral doesn't eliminate haunting entirely, but it changes the tense – the 'what if' becomes the 'what if as if' – and, dare I say it, makes the project more sociological in a fashion. From Ernst Bloch, I took to calling this living space the utopian margins. How to represent the utopian margins? I'm not sure that I really know the answer to that question or that I've done it particularly well. And the term archive helps and obscures at the same time. The Hawthorn Archive is not really an archive or about the archive. In its own world that's clear, since it has a library but also a society, system of refuge and so on. I wanted to represent the utopian margins as a mode of living. The archive apparatus became a tool, perhaps not an ideal one, for conveying a larger collectivity and a larger ongoing process bound by public and private relationships; an image of a community working and living in-difference, of not waiting for another world but of being already there.

In taking into account alternative histories, you are disputing the notion of what is political and, more specifically, political resistance. In the book, you are exploring forms of non-participation as spaces of utopia and political resistance. Why do you think it is important to think about non-participation in the Hawthorn Archive?

Non-participation is one modality of what I call 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. Running away, living apart, squatting, communing, feral trading, bartering, self-managed currencies, human, debt, labour, knowledge strikes, boycott, divestment, non-policing, throwing your shoe at an occupying president: the ways of non-participation in the given order of things are many, varied and hard to summarize. And they are taken up for a variety of reasons, including the failure or irrelevance of states and the US–European post–World War II social movement model. I'd like to further answer this question by sharing the conclusion of an archive internal memo.

The archive received a request from some friends at the Museum of Non Participation, which raised (again) the questions of what we mean by non-participation, what its relationship is to adjacent and allied conceptual activities, such as escape, running away, marronage, fugitivity and abolition, and whether we have a large collection of materials on it, as I told them we did. The suggestion was made that there might be some utility in trying to prepare a clear definition and while everyone agreed that a clear definition was neither doable nor desirable, we also agreed to look into the matter further. I was assigned to try to distinguish between forms of non-participation that embody a protest logic and those that don't, the details of which can be found in the longer memo to the group. Here is how I concluded it:

For us, non-participation as a means to a better way of living is what's crucial. The question for us is as follows: what is required to stop appealing to the system itself for redress, to stop believing the forces that are killing you can/will save you? What is required for being ready and available, possibly at a moment's notice, to live autonomously from the system one wants to abolish? Non-participation to achieve participation in the given terms of order is not our goal although, as everyone here always insists, thoughtfulness is necessary to assess when withdrawal and separation is an abdication of a responsibility to struggle – merely a reaction – and when it is the only thing possible. The case of prisoners is obviously relevant and important since they are the other large group of people systematically and legally denied participation in social, political and economic life. Living in prison – in a cage – requires special skills, difficult to acquire, that are always non-participatory: it's not possible to live in there on their terms, which is why prisoner protests often take the form they do – hunger strikes, self-immolation, sewing one's lips closed as they have been doing for years in the offshore immigration prisons Australia runs. You can begin to see why the experiences of people for whom protest and existential liberalism are rarely viable options have extremely important lessons to teach us. By existential liberalism, I mean people for whom protest or critical exposé are important to their identity and their weekend plans but not a necessity because if the demands aren't met it really doesn't matter, doesn't negatively impact their lives or doesn't change anything they're doing or planning on doing. There's a lot of work involved in living independently from the system you hate or that hates you and it requires mindfulness and divestment. I propose that we not get too involved in parsing the term non-participation except in so far as it might help us keep track of those moments and practices in which there is an active ongoing starting again 'all at once, as if born of some underground region of civilization', as if a counter-world. Let's return to the radical traditions and the vocabulary closest to us, to running away and the preparation for it, to fugitivity and to abolition as the watchword or keyword, as Robert Fanuzzi writes, for a 'sense of urgency, relevance, or potential for the future' (Hawthorn Archive, 2007, pp. 145–146).

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