Natascha Sadr Haghighian

Sleepwalking in a Dialectical Picture Puzzle, Part 1: A Conversation with Avery Gordon

For my Night School seminar that took place at the New Museum in New York in October 2008, I invited Avery Gordon and Tom Keenan to have conversations in Whole Foods, a huge organic supermarket around the corner from the New Museum. The original plan had been to hold the entire seminar there instead of in the museum's auditorium, but this plan failed when the supermarket refused to grant us permission. Instead, we held our conversations there and documented them using wireless microphones and a spy camera attached to cameraperson Angela Anderson's shoulder.

The aisles and various spaces of the store served as a matrix for our conversations. Avery and I spoke about subjugated knowledges and the relationship between research and the ability to act. We considered the apparitional state of realities with no place in the politics of representation as a force of agency and change. As we wandered through sections of the store, a selection of objects and functions served as coordinates for our conversation.

The conversation lasted about forty-five minutes, after which the crew walked back to the museum, rewound the tape, and screened it in the New Museum auditorium for the seminar participants. The screening was then followed by a discussion.

This text is a transcript of my conversation with Avery. The conversation with Tom will follow in issue #5 of e-flux journal.

– Natascha Sadr Haghighian

Natascha Sadr Haghighian: Welcome, everybody, to the third part of this seminar. We are at Whole Foods on Bowery and Houston, and let me just briefly explain why we're here. I see this conversation held in a store, more precisely in a grass-roots-organic-movement-turned-major-corporation-type store, not only as representing an urgent question of how to relate knowledge and action in a way that makes sense – that creates agency – but also as a necessary shift away from the secure and isolated situation of an auditorium to a more challenging place that incorporates the contradictions and incompatibilities of theory in everyday life. I hope this makes sense. I experience Whole Foods as being very representative of everyday struggles, and its confusion with operational representations (ones that seem to repeat gestures of political agency) raise all the buzz words of being in the right, on the right side – consuming without shame. How do we deal with such distorted representations? How do we read them, and how do we interact?

So, today I'm very happy to be here with Avery Gordon. You are professor of sociology at

the University of California, and you are the author of *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* and of *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People*. You've been involved in the prison abolition movement and you have a weekly radio program on KCSB 91.9 FM Santa Barbara called "No Alibis." So Avery, before starting our conversation, you wanted to provide us with some basic statistics about where we are at the moment; maybe you could do that.

Avery Gordon: Thank you for inviting me, it's good to be here with you. I've just flown in from California where much of the organic produce in this store also came from. I feel like I'm following in the carbon footprints of the lettuce! Yes, I wanted to say a word about Whole Foods for those who don't know anything about the store. In 1980, Whole Foods was founded in Austin, Texas, by John Maki, who is still its primary CEO. Beginning with one small store, Whole Foods now has 270 stores in the United States and the UK, 54,000 employees, nine distribution centers, nine bakery centers, and five commissaries. Whole Foods is a 5.5-billion-dollar publicly traded stock enterprise. In 2006, Whole Foods made 200 million dollars just in local produce.

NSH: Avery, I was very much looking forward to this conversation. You have such a clear understanding of abstract concepts, but you never forget how they connect to life – to real people and their struggles – and how to talk about this connection. This is really important to me because your practice claims this link that should exist – or that I want to exist – between knowledge and action. Yesterday we were talking about the importance of contextualizing images. Maybe we could say it's also about contextualizing events. You mentioned that the history of events, also within political struggles, is very important to know about, to distribute, and to discuss as part of the struggle.

AG: One of the main questions you sent for me to think about in preparation for our conversation concerned the extent to which radical or subjugated knowledges tend to be re-appropriated from their guiding motivations towards other ends – in this case, for corporate profitability. Yesterday, with Tom Keenan, that question was centered on images and imaging in in-store marketing, and more broadly. It seems to me there are at least two different ways to approach this problem. One is to focus on what can be seen and what cannot be seen in the deeper meanings of the "ecological" and the "organic" while one is shopping in the megastore,

Wayne County Public Library Community Peace Garden

Whole Foods aisles

sitting and having coffee or a meal, or just browsing – all of which are invited here. Another way is to focus on the history of struggles that have helped to shape the present moment, and that are also erased in the store, blinded almost by its bright lights.

You are asking about the extent to which the promises of the organic/sustainable food movement and the environmental justice movement are used and/or abused by Whole Foods and others like them (although they are the biggest of their kind). As you've been discussing over the past couple of days, it's clear that you have many thoughts on how Whole Foods and the Whole Foods shopping experience convince people that they are doing something better than continuing a consumer capitalism lifestyle that benefits the few rather than the many.

For me, part of answering this big question is always to situate the images, signs, or stories offered in that shadowy social and historical context – in the subjugated knowledges that the dominant image, sign, or narrative occludes. As you've pointed out, Whole Foods is full of quite striking signs addressing the shopper, such as "Power to the People" or "Local Organic Sustainable." It is also an intensely narrativized place: everywhere there are placards with information and little tales giving you a story about how you should understand the source of the products on display (their mode of production and distribution), and how you should understand your consumption experience. Michael Pollan, in his wonderful book *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, called this elaborate interpellation and double fetishization of the commodity "supermarket pastoral." (I say "double" because it is not merely that the commodity mystifies or hides the social and labor relations that produced it – it still does that, and it also makes a fetish of the process by which the commodity is made to appear to us as a reflection of our desires.)

But Whole Foods co-exists alongside movements, activities, and everyday life practices that are far more radical than it – ones that are oriented not towards reproducing capitalist economic and ideological relations, but are oriented towards creating alternative ones. Whole Foods and "industrial organic" co-exist alongside, for example, my local farmer's market. The Santa Barbara farmer's market has been around for a long time and is a highly valued local institution. The sellers are almost all local or small regional growers, and they have established strict controls over who can sell what there, especially around the prohibition of genetically modified seed. The market represents the local sustainable-scaled sector of the organic food "industry." In fact, it reflects the tradition and values of the organic farming movement of the 1960s. Most of its growers and sellers would not even like to be called an industry, with that word's connotations of big business, monopoly, and production for profit. In effect, however, their movement made possible industrial organic – the Whole Foods model – and what you increasingly see in large supermarkets.

My point is that industrial organic grows at the same time as explosive battles over seeds, for example, not only grow worldwide but also model new political formations and processes grounded in complex understandings of knowledge and culture (as with the farmers in India and the work of Vandana Shiva's research foundation and seed banks such as Navdanya). There exist today very profound and far-reaching movements for environmental justice and against environmental racism that link food production with the politics of waste and garbage. What is characteristic about these movements is an effort to immediately create and practice alternative ways of living and eating and cleaning up after ourselves that are outside capitalist economic relations.

You can see Whole Foods and Navdanya as contradictions – certainly Navdanya is a negation of much of what Whole Foods is and represents. I also think it's helpful to see them as distinct – part of multiple universes that exist on differential and proximate planes. The corporate model is far more dominant than that of indigenous seed banking, so the question then becomes: how do we shift the balance towards common seed banking and away from finance?

NSH: Munir Fasheh, a Palestinian professor of Mathematics, has spoken of a "pluralism of knowledges" ("knowledges," as opposed to a singular notion of knowledge). Maybe we could say that all the knowledges that come out of the different struggles and movements represent a pluralist diversity, and in places like Whole Foods, they are being appropriated, monopolized to serve only one purpose, one model. Then something else happens to knowledge and its agency – the struggle becomes also for formerly subjugated knowledges that were a successful part of a previous struggle or movement before being kidnapped and appropriated by corporate interests. If a sentence like "Power to the People" is used to advertise a big corporation, it can be very confusing. But again, the question is: how can the sentence be re-appropriated for the struggles it was once a part of? How can knowledge be re-contextualized and linked to action?

AG: Yes, I agree it can be confusing, although it's become the stuff of mainstream advertising. There was a revolution in advertising in the United States in the 1960s. As Thomas Frank shows in *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, the advertising industry was exceedingly successful in appropriating the countercultural, antiestablishment rhetoric and using it to encourage mass consumption at unprecedented levels. Whether or not Frank is correct in also claiming that white youth culture in the 1960s was encouraged or anticipated by the advertising industry (rather than the other way around), the basic fact remains that it is routine for advertising to play with, invent, and solicit sophisticated notions of representation, imaging, coolness, and politics. The hiring of university graduates out of art, media, and culture departments began in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and it is the norm today. Many of these young people have studied a range of critical theories, usually see themselves as "progressive" rather than conservative, and, in my experience, also often believe that they can retain these values within the corporate environment, even as they know full well who is hiring them, why, and for what. Advertising, like the fashion, music, and art industries, has been appropriating the "street" as the norm for a long time now, which means that a lot of consumers are highly literate in this kind of language switching.

The question I always wonder about is: what exactly do people (and we should always specify which people) do with signs such as "Power to the People" when they see them, (if they even notice them)? Many people have become very sophisticated handlers of the constant solicitations that surround them, even as their historical consciousness shrinks. I think we know less than we think we do about how folks receive these signs and messages, and what they mean to them. At the least, I think it's important to remember that they are advertisements, and to not confuse them with something else – to treat them as what they are, a part of the production of consumer culture and particular kinds of consumers.

NSH: Right.

AG: The larger issue, it seems to me, is the extent to which the corporate organic supermarket and its signs and symbols and figures (such as "Rosie the Chicken") create a story, or a set of understandings that exclude more accurate and challenging ones. There is a

sign that says “Power to the People,” but no sign or placard that also says that Whole Foods owes its existence to those individuals who, in 1969, occupied an abandoned plot of land in Berkeley, California, that had been the subject of stalled development plans, called it “People’s Park,” and then starting growing food and vegetables to give away for free. The popularization of organic food and healthy eating did not trickle down – it trickled up. For example, the central argument of Frances Moore Lappé’s best-selling and vegetarian *Diet for a Small Planet*, published in 1971, was that hunger was not caused by overpopulation (which was the reigning eugenicist argument), but by food production and distribution methods that benefit the few in the First World. It was her argument that we lacked (and still do) economic and political democracy that captured people’s attention, which she brought forward as she continued her work. The story behind People’s Park and its failure is too long and complicated to tell here – and today it is mostly the daytime residence for people without homes – but it’s worth noting that it is not so far from the Whole Foods Berkeley store.

One prominent sign in the store here is “We pay 100% of our health benefits to our employees.” Indeed, in 2007, *Fortune* magazine voted Whole Foods one of the 100 best companies to work for in the United States. The Whole Foods Web site has considerable information describing its corporate management values and how well the company treats its employees – Whole Foods considers itself a model of the “socially responsible business.” What you’re not told is that John Maki is avowedly anti-union. Whole Foods has been seriously criticized for the variety of ways its aggressive monopolization, anti-unionism, public misinformation, and profiteering have contravened its claims of being a company dedicated to community development and planetary sustainability. (See “Whole Foods Market: What’s Wrong with Whole Foods” on Michael Bluejay’s site, and Mark T. Harris, “Welcome to ‘Whole-Mart’: Rotten Apples in the Social Responsibility Industry”). It’s not just that Whole Foods doesn’t advertise its critics – it would be surprising if they did. It’s that what’s hidden behind the “Power to the People” sign and the lifestyle politics is the far more radical critique of what Vandana Shiva calls the “Lifelords”: those companies and individuals whose aim is to privatize and sell the common means of life, including food and water. Behind the lifestyle politics and the signs that announce

it, is why the Mayor of Philadelphia authorized the bombing of the revolutionary group MOVE in 1978 (killing 7 adults and 4 children) and why the United States government has declared Earth First! a terrorist organization.

NSH: Yes. Does that mean that what is to be done here is to reveal the hidden structures or hidden facts of the place – dig out the dirt behind the silky smooth facade? That would be a really traditional approach to criticism, to action. Yesterday, in the conversation with Tom Keenan we found that – at least concerning images – the act of revealing the truth often doesn't have any effect any more.

AG: Well, it's interesting that you'd use the word "digging," because I wanted to talk about the Diggers today. But to first address the question you're asking: I suppose you're right to describe finding out the things behind the things – identifying what's present and what's absent in a given situation or place – as a traditional method of critical engagement. How one chooses to go about encountering and identifying the things behind the things (what you're calling the structure) and what one makes of the encounter is, in my opinion, what really matters. Nothing is automatically changed by traditional methods of exposure or by untraditional methods either. What to do – which includes what you will or won't think in the next moment – must be dug up as well. No outcomes are, alas, given in advance. I am interested in and drawn to old forms of struggle that repeat over time because I am interested in time itself, in the continuities of the abuse of power and in the somewhat remarkable repetition of the struggle against its varied forms. Even if these memories of resistance and struggle and knowing otherwise are intensely constructed and staged, they nonetheless create a force field that connects us through time and space to others, and to a power we are constantly denied and told we do not possess: the power to create life on our own terms and to sustain that creation over the long term.

You've heard me on this point before, but I think it's crucial to see beyond the constraints of these constructions to a place where they're there and powerful, but where they are only one condition of our being and not entirely in control of what we are and what our capabilities are. This kind of (in)sight (or second sight) is a real capacity, and it also changes one's perceptual boundaries and political compass at the same time. You talked about this in a related way yesterday when you described the conscious act of not looking at the photographs of the torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad. There's a tremendous power that comes from your decision to not need to look – to reject the claim on you that you must look because the photographs show how things "really are." This power is what I've called being in-difference, which is not an absence of caring, but is rather the presence of a modality of engagement that is autonomous and creative with regard to what you are aiming to achieve, and not derivative of what you're aiming to replace.

NSH: I'm thinking of another thing that Munir Fasheh has suggested, which is the notion of co-authorship. Maybe it relates to what you're saying. He described how, in his homeland of Palestine, colonization and occupation also happened on the level of language and knowledge. He explains how the definition of what is to be known – and what the language for that knowledge should be – was defined by certain institutions that were installed by the colonial power. He suggests that in order to decolonize oneself, one should only use words that one has a personal experience with. It's quite a radical approach to language. I thought it was interesting in the sense that, to do this, one would have to find out first what a word actually means within one's own context, then ask how one might appropriate it for one's own purposes, all in order to finally start using it. And then, just step by step, one's vocabulary expands. I imagine feeling speechless at first – what are the words that one has personal experience with? If you consider it as an approach to all kinds of colonizations, you notice how hard it must be at first, especially in a time when everything that we encounter seems to be taken care of in one way or another, prepared for us – not only food. When we go down to the other part of the store, we will see all this produce that has been processed and prepared for us on so many levels. It's all taken care of for us, even the narrative that comes with the product. You don't have to do anything other than select and consume. Decolonizing oneself here would probably mean not using any of these offerings – just eating what you can grow or find yourself. Maybe that makes it clear how hard it is. To relate this back to other practices, I think a key question concerns how to understand and decide what words one wants to use, what kinds of actions one wants to take, what kinds of places to go, et cetera. I wonder if you can relate to the idea of co-authorship at all and what would it mean for you?

AG: Do you remember when I first met you and you described a number of your projects to me, including the one at the Berlin Zoo and at the bus stop, with the art funders and curators? I thought they were so interesting and wonderful and asked you if you'd heard of Harold Garfinkel and his ethnomethodological experiments, because your projects reminded me of what he'd done. Those experiments engaged a question you

brought to those projects, and which you're asking now. That is: what is the moment at which institutional decorum and the taken-for-granted reproducibility or sensibility of a given institution breaks down? At what point can it be broken? The point cannot be predicted in advance, but we know it when it happens. At its breaking point, as you and Garfinkel have both shown, people become extremely unsettled because the mechanisms they've relied on to keep things running smoothly without having to know or think too much about how that actually happens fail. The rigging begins to show and the decorum is broken. You're asking me now: what are the points at which our language fails? At what point do we have to learn how to construct a new language for being decolonized? I think you're right: we start with speechlessness, and then a degree of self-consciousness of speaking that, characteristically (one hopes in this case as well), disappears with fluency.

Let me connect back to the Diggers before we go downstairs. The Diggers, or the "True Levellers," as they called themselves, were anarchistic, communistic, radically self-governing commoners who appeared among a series of radical groups, including the original Levellers and the Ranters who were active during the English Civil War in the 1640s and 1650s. You sent me a quotation by Michael Taussig that described the person who lives sovereignty beyond utility results in being branded a hysteric. Certainly, to call sexual libertarians "Ranters" (the Diggers were found guilty of being Ranters as well, even though they did not favor sexual liberty) is to brand them as hysterical. But the idea of living sovereignty beyond utility expresses well what the Diggers aimed to achieve. The activities and views of radical seventeenth-century popular groups during the English Civil War may seem an obscure reference for us today, but perhaps not! Christopher Hill wrote:

> There were ... two revolutions in mid-seventeenth-century England. The one which succeeded established the sacred rights of property ... gave political power to the propertied (sovereignty of Parliament and common law, abolition of prerogative courts), and removed all impediments to the triumph of the ideology of the men of property – the protestant ethic. There was, however, another revolution which never happened, though from time to time it threatened. This might have established communal property, a far wider democracy in political and legal institutions, might have disestablished the state church and rejected the protestant ethic.1

The Diggers were part of this second revolution, part of a fork opened in the historical road, which has been erased from an official history that celebrates the benefits of capitalist parliamentary democracy over monarchical absolutism. The Diggers were called by that name because they not only believed in equality of persons – in the leveling of inequalities and indignities between rich and poor and between the powerful and the powerless – but they also formed radical cooperative communities to prevent the enclosure of common land, and the further privatization of property in England. They would literally dig up common lands to create growing fields, the produce of which they would give away for free, inviting others to join them. They were set upon by the police and the state and the local landowners, and eventually their movement was destroyed. The ideas that guided them never disappeared, of course, finding expression today in the strong movements to stop the privatization of water, air, and the little public land that's left and among those who seek a "true" economic and political equality. The Diggers produced a number of declarations and manifestos, and I thought it might make a certain point to read from one of them in Whole Foods, where only a faint trace of them can be seen. Do we have time?

NSH: Yes, sure, but let me add a comment while we go down to the food court. Hearing you talk about the erasure of history in the case of these struggles or transformatory processes, I have to think back to your involvement with ghostly matters. In your book by the same name, you vividly describe how things, entities, events that are deprived of a status in the system of recognized history or the acknowledged world become apparitions. It seems to me that it is important to talk to these apparitions, and to hear what they have to say ...

AG: Yes – to talk to them and to listen as well, because in the listening one figures out how to deal with the impact of people and events and possibilities that have been violently suppressed and then return to haunt. It's not merely a matter of telling you the story of the Diggers and about how they were murdered and politically repressed and what the implications of the theft of common lands for private gain have been. The telling of the story is neither for information per se, nor is it for entertainment – the storytelling creates a connection across time and space so that we who are living now can work to put an end to the conditions that repeat, and thus continue to haunt us.

NSH: The telling of their story is empowering.

AG: Yes, it's empowering, and it's also a way

"England is not a free people, till the poor that have no land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the commons..."

Gerrard Winstanley, 1649

of moving backwards and forwards in time in something of the way Walter Benjamin described the movement of a certain kind of historical agency or even divinity, protecting past and future generations, and also catching the liens that make putting that "Power for the People" sign up in a megastore even possible. Shall I read from one of the Digger Manifestoes?

NSH: Yes, please.

AG: "A Declaration from the poor oppressed People of England directed to all that call themselves, or are called Lords of Manors, through this Nation; that have begun to cut, or that through fear and covetousness, do intend to cut down the Woods and Trees that grow upon the Commons and Waste Land" was written by Gerrard Winstanley and published in 1649. Gerrard Winstanley called himself a True Leveller, distinguishing himself from John Lilburne and other more moderate Leveller leaders. The Diggers were a much smaller group than the not-very-unified Leveller movement, which historians now understand to have consisted of at least two wings: a moderate constitutional wing led by John Lilburne and John Wildman, and a more radical wing situated in the (New Model) Army and among the general population, especially in London. Among the more radical Levellers and the Diggers, the fight had been – and continued to be – for the eradication of private property and tyranny of political rule by the wealthy and the powerful. Parliament and the Army and the disposition of the country's property were all to be fundamentally leveled, with no status distinction between rich and poor, noble and commoner.

The declaration is signed with about twenty names, but there were about 200 people who occupied St. George's Hill immediately before this declaration in Surrey was given:

> We whose names are subscribed, do in the name of all the poor oppressed people in *England*, declare unto you that call your selves lords of Manors, and Lords of the Land ... That the Earth was not made purposefully for you, to be Lords of it, and we to be your Slaves, Servants, and Beggers; but it was made to be a common Livelihood to all, without respect of persons: And that your buying and selling of Land and the Fruits of it, one to another is *The cursed thing*, and was brought in by War; which hath, and still does establish murder and theft, In the hands of some branches of Mankinde over others, which is the greatest outward burden and unrighteous power ... For the power of inclosing land, [privatizing public or common land] and owning Propriety, was brought into the Creation by your Ancestors by the Sword; which first did murther their fellow Creatures, Men, and after plunder or steal away their Land, and left this Land successively to you, their children. And therefore though you did not kill or theeve [although they did!] yet you hold that cursed thing in your hand by the power of the Sword; and so you justifie the wicked deeds of your Fathers; and that sin of your Fathers should be visited upon the Head of you, and your Children, to the third and fourth Generation and longer too, till your bloody and theeving power be rooted out of the Land ... And to prevent your scrupulous Objections, know this, That we Must neither buy nor sell; Money must not any longer ... be the great god, that hedges in some, and hedges out others; for Money is but part of the Earth; And surely, the Righteous Creator ... did never ordain That unless some of Mankinde, do not bring that Mineral (Silver and Gold) into their hands, to others of their own kinde, that they should neither be fed, nor clothed; no surely, For this was the project of Tyrant-flesh (which Land-lords are branches of) to set his Image upon Money. And they make this unrighteous Law that none should buy or sell, eat or be clothed, or have any comfortable Livelihood ... unless they bring this Image stamped upon Gold or Silver onto their hands.[2]

In 1649, the Diggers denounce concentrated power, private property, and the capitalist money economy, which is not yet dominant, but is in the process of becoming so. They see clearly that violence and war establishes so-called free capitalist economies and they will shortly denounce, equally vigorously, the police power of the state and its right to hold to itself a monopoly over the use of force, which Cromwell will establish as the defining feature of parliamentary democracy. (There is another very contemporary lesson of a different sort in the history of the New Model Army and the remarkable agitation and ferment of democratic ideas from its "masterless men," to use Christopher Hill's expression, but another time for that!)

NSH: It is very interesting that one of the representations of power is an image printed on a piece of metal, right? It never occurred to me that a coin is actually a very powerful combination of a valuable material carrying an icon.

AG: It's the turning of that graven image – money – into a deity or a god that they're trying to warn us against. And so they call first for the

common land to be named what it is: a commons, property to be used and shared, not available for private appropriation and use. They lost this fight, and by the nineteenth century, England had enclosed or privatized virtually all its older public common lands. They also called for true equality – the leveling of all status. They say: "Therefore we are resolved to be cheated no longer, nor be held under the slavish fear of you ... seeing the Earth was made for us as well as for you. And if the Common Land belongs to us who are poor oppressed, surely the woods that grow upon the Commons belong to us likewise: therefore we are resolved to try the utmost ... to know whether we shall be free men, or slaves."3

NSH: It's all there.

AG: It's all there, including the analytic core of what's become the re-emergence of the commons as a social goal and political watchword for a profoundly radical environmentalism that links a critique of private property, consumerism, and money worship to self-organized democratic governance without war, without policing, and without the tyrannical state. Peter Linebaugh's most recent book, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* is a brief for this new communing – or perhaps we should even call it communism – that is connected, but not bound to the old.

NSH: Reading this declaration here is quite an intense experience and it shows that a connection across time and space not only creates consciousness about the history of these struggles, but immediately changes the perception of the present. It's all there – you just have to listen to it. Especially in situations when a serious financial crisis weakens the system to the degree that a lot of things can happen, this connection can be very useful. The newspapers in Europe, at least for a couple of days, were talking about the end of capitalism. Their comments actually became more moderate after a bit, but for at least a few days, mainstream German newspapers were discussing Socialism as a possible alternative. Should we slowly head towards the exit?

AG: Yes.

NSH: I wonder whether, if we are able to connect more to the apparitional history of struggle we might actually be able to react to situations of crisis in a much more profound and meaningful way – to use them for the things that we fight for, and that we think are necessary changes in this society.

AG: I think so. We reach back to honor and bring that struggle forward. As we go forward, we have to make it ours, and it will differ from the Diggers. The forks in the road are always there, it's a matter of whether we take them or not. And in order to take them we have to accurately recognize our capabilities – ones that, as I mentioned before, are always denied and discouraged. It's not as if nobody knows how to live without property – lots of people know how to live that way! Many people – most of us, in fact – know how to build and maintain social relationships that are not based on exchange value. When I remember this, I am optimistic, because even though most of the people who live without property are poor and really need some, and even though exchange value is the dominant value guiding the organization of much of public life, it's not a closed situation and we have far more power to change the situation than we often presume. The really crucial question is: how invested are you in the perpetuation of what we've got? Being "critical" is no guarantee that you are in-different, divested of the system's lures and promises and rewards. The question I always ask myself is: if all that I can criticize disappeared tomorrow, can I imagine a worthwhile and better existence? I always answer Yes without qualification to that question – even though I can imagine things becoming worse, too!

NSH: I guess this leads us back to the notion of the sovereign individual and life beyond utility that Michael Taussig described in *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. The sovereign in this sense is the hysteric, the defacer, the masked revolutionary who is questioning the name of the event: "why is this the name of the event and not something else?" As a response to received notions of reality and truth, the hysteric defamiliarizes those notions by repeatedly questioning the name of the event – by not accepting the naturalized rule of the things that are put into place and that appear to be the only way to do things. Defacement of the given names of events deconstructs representations of power and takes them to a domain of life beyond utility.

AG: Yes, I agree.

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This conversation took place on October 25, 2008 as part of Night School, an artist project by Anton Vidokle in the form of a temporary school. A yearlong program of monthly seminars and workshops, Night School draws upon a group of local and international artists, writers, and theorists to conceptualize and conduct the program.

Avery Gordon is professor of sociology and law and society at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and on the guest faculty at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is the author of *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power and People* and *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, and the editor (with Christopher Newfield) of *Mapping Multiculturalism* and (with Michael Ryan) *Body Politics: Disease, Desire, and the Family*, among other works. Her most recent articles on imprisonment and the War on Terror were published in *Race & Class* and *Le Monde Diplomatique*. Her current writing aims to comparatively understand the nature of captivity and confinement today, its means of dispossession, and what is required to abolish it. Since 1997, she has co-hosted No Alibis, a weekly public affairs radio program on KCSB 91.9 FM, Santa Barbara.

Natascha Sadr Haghighian works in the fields of video, performance, computer, and sound, primarily concerned with the sociopolitical implications of constructions of vision from a central perspective and with abstract events within the structure of industrial society, as well as with the strategies and returning circulations that become apparent in them. Rather than offer highlights from a CV, Haghighian asks readers to go to www.bioswop.net, a CV-exchange platform where artists and other cultural practitioners can borrow and lend CVs for various purposes.

1
Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972), 15.

2
See http://www.bilderberg.org/land/poor.htm.

3
Ibid.