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The Hawthorn Archive: letters from the utopian margins

By AVERY F. GORDON (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 472 pp.

The Hawthorn Archive: letters from the utopian margins, by Avery Gordon, is a repository of conversations, intimate epistolary exchange and critical public manifesto, introspective and declaratory commentary. Its interventions are both acute and startlingly applicable across broad swathes of social thought. Gordon demonstrates the skill of a seasoned curator fluent in the power of association, intertextuality, and the multiple registers and textures possible in the presentation of textual and visual material. If conventional historical work is imagined to be a freighter, moving smoothly over the sea, shifting neatly stacked aluminium containers, *The Hawthorn Archive* presents the containers and their spoils and riches, crashing and partially submerged in the violence of the waves, acknowledging that this turbulence, and the effects of the encounter on our perceptive range, are also constitutive of the archive. In this way, *The Hawthorn Archive* resists a naive reading of the terrain and climate of the archive – its thick, disciplinary gloss. Instead, it takes on a much more layered, complex and, in many ways, realistic view of historical engagement. These are the utopian margins, the picture beyond the frame of the idyllic, where envisioning history is in contention with linear configurations of time and uncritical, unimaginative reliance on historical ‘fact’.

It is unusual for a book to attempt to take on broad questions in contemporary critical thought using not one but many strands of social, literary and philosophical vernacular. *The Hawthorn Archive* is unique in this regard. In this rare and inventive volume, Avery Gordon manages to critically interrogate a breadth of utopian thinking while breaking from the formal and interpretive constraints of any single disciplinary character. The book is both explanatory and demonstrative, both interrogating and enacting the multidimensional nature of texts, objects and even their assembly, management and collection as artefacts of imagination, capturing not only events but complex social relations and systems of thought. It engages with core contemporary debates on the archive, the intellectual and political pursuits of utopian thought, the intersections of race, gender and Marxism, the tensions between artistic, historical and philosophical approaches, and many permutations of these topics. The breadth of such an ambitious set of interventions, in other words, is typically aided by the disciplinary strictures of particular philosophical traditions, the vicissitudes of which include assumptions about beginnings and ends, acceptable logics and devices, and the relevance of texts outside the frame. Gordon, in offering the reader a different, layered way of accessing what she calls ‘the utopian margins,’ incites a critique of these strictures, suggesting that there is a cost to the disciplinary rigidity that has been long regarded as helpful convention.

This is not to say that Gordon abandons logics of engagement – rather, she introduces multiple levels and genres of exchange between the reader and the text, as well as between different texts and images within the archive. *The Hawthorn Archive* reads as a manual, an artist’s installation, a record of existence,

a transcript, a journal, a non-linear map, a pedagogical resource, a glossary of utopian vision and folly. A work built at least in part on collaborative contributions, it is dense and mirrors the range of entries that it theorises by way of the synergies between its form and content. The layers of intervention in *The Hawthorn Archive* are multiple – some explicit, some metaphoric, and some curatorial. The reader must negotiate various latitudes of narration, a multi-textured scheme of file notes, queues and several formats of text, as well as images, just as one would navigate archival records in a repository. The effort is worth the reward, as it allows the reader to at once abandon the constraints of genre in order to access the world in which Gordon places her, and become extremely aware of genre, having to work to shift gears between the artefacts, asking constantly: *what work is this piece doing and how does it affect how I understand the Hawthorn Archive?*

Gordon directly addresses the question of why the archive is used as a way to frame this work. She explains:

Why represent this utopian surplus as an archive? To represent this surplus or excess in the form of an archive was first of all to embrace, with a little humor, the impossibility of such a thing – the impossibility of my doing it; after all, the learned specialization and collection that characterizes most archive projects was precisely what I couldn't manage to do – and the impossibility of the idea itself. For the idea that the Hawthorn Archive would be deliberately unfinished, obscure, nonlinear, with no directions or blueprints, to better reflect both the actual state of most archives and the nature of this one's specific activities and collections was to presume a form can function as a literal representation of a concept and thus to reintroduce a positivism of perfection into the very process of trying to eliminate it (pg. x).

The form is demonstrative of the character of the archive – 'deliberately unfinished, obscure, nonlinear' – rather than a representative account of the form and content of the archive as such.

The work's engagement with foundational scholarship on and criticism of utopian thought – for example, the discussions of Marcuse's notion of 'qualitative difference' and of Bambara's criticism of utopian traditions in the first chapter – effectively sets the stage for introducing the plethora of material found across the over-400-page volume. It is worth reading the book in the order it is written; however, diving in and out of sequence, finding images and artefacts that compel, and being seduced by the juxtaposition of forms has its own advantages: one is faced constantly with the possibility of being galvanised on a register and with a vernacular or aesthetic that surprises. As Saidiya Hartman notes on the book jacket, 'it is an exercise in runaway thought'.

One benefit to having a book that is an exercise in runaway thought is that it can be a reference point or glossary without being an instruction, a set of possibilities without being a blueprint. It can provide the possibility of sequence without forcing its adoption. When I pick up *The Hawthorn Archive*, I do not feel led by text or sequence, and I feel invited to analyse an art piece, or challenge a

juxtaposition, or ponder a format. In this way, I feel invited to use my imagination in a way that is, in my experience, unique, particular for a book with such intricate theoretical interventions. And when I focus, zooming in, something else emerges – in the analysis of a world map, a haunting analysis of Philip Scheffner’s film *The Halfmoon Files*, the story of the execution of Leon Czolgosz, or a photograph of a sticky note containing lines from Audre Lorde’s poem ‘Never to Dream of Spiders’.

In this archive of utopian thought, the reader encounters theoretically rich concepts of freedom and friendship, racism, colonialism and revolution, abolition and language, fugitivity and surplus, concepts of work, struggle, knowledge and participation. It is a challenging and adventurous read. At times, Gordon drops the reader smack into the middle of a debate or controversy that has long been raging, and the reader has to struggle to find her orientation, to find the contours and a way in. But then, this is the nature of the archive she is gesturing towards, and it demands intensely dynamic engagement with the material. It demands the reader to constantly interpret and integrate form, content and curatorial choice when thinking about the archive, alongside what Gordon calls the ‘utopian margins’. In some ways, it is difficult to imagine that a volume with such ambitious interventions could demand anything less.

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